The Fourth Norwood

Robert E Pinkerton

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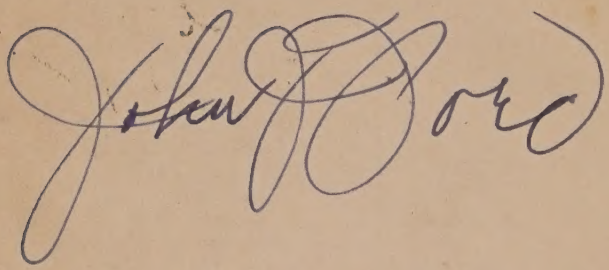

John J Ford
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THE FOURTH NORWOOD

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BY

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Rod Norwood was thirteen years old when he first saw Ehe-bik, The Spider. Everyone in a vast expanse of wilderness knew of this man whose grim history had become a portentous legend and all feared him, except Tom Norwood, Rod's father.

Rod was resetting a mink trap on the banks of Drowning River, in the center of his own private hunting territory, a district as inviolable as that of any Indian and which through two winters had known the prints of only Rod's own small, square-toed snowshoes. The cold was extreme and the boy's hands were blue and his fingers curiously without feeling as they fumbled with the delicately filed catch of the Newhouse trap.

In that moment The Spider was far from his thoughts. So intent was he on finishing his task before the cold bit too deeply that he did not hear the soft swish of snowshoes until they were almost abreast of him on the river. Surprised, and a little incensed by the intrusion, he looked up to see a tall

half-breed shuffling swiftly and without apparent effort at the head of a dog team.

The man did not look at the boy. Further upstream a glance had told him of the lad's presence and identity and he strode on, his black, cruel face thrust forward, almost out of the hood of his capote. Even about the dogs there seemed to be something grim and suggestive of their owner. They, too, scorned the boy. One turned his head for a moment, a fierce animal that lifted its upper lip in a snarl more of disdain than threat.

Kneeling there in the snow, the steel of the trap reaching the bones of his numb fingers, Rod received the entire, cumulative effect of the swift, silent, forbidding procession — the cruel face of the half-breed, the arrogant, savage dogs and, last of all, the man in the cariole.

Rod knew at once it was The Spider. The driver, the dogs, the absence of sleigh bells, all had foretold it. This was the manner in which only The Spider traveled, swinging soundlessly along the trails of the north, his entourage as sinister as his far-reaching grip on the lives of wilderness people. The boy's heart leaped high, with a peculiarly suffocating result, as his eyes darted to the man who rode.

Yet he did not look at the face, so often described to him by Indians in minute detail, but at the cariole — at the forward part where a man's legs would be stretched out flat before him. And there his eyes were held, staring wide in mingled horror and boyish

curiosity in that which is horrible, for The Spider had no legs.

Stiff and straight, lashed in the cariole, the man's body sat bolt upright at the rear. Robes and the moosehide covering hid everything except his arms, his hooded head and the otter-rimmed face. He seemed helpless, impotent, and yet there peered from the circle of fur a pair of dark eyes that leaped like the lash of a dog whip, and suddenly drew the boy's eyes to them.

Rod was conscious of a distinct shock as he looked into The Spider's face. For years he had known that such a time would come — that some day he would see Aaron Cron. Now he found himself desperately summoning all his courage to keep his gaze from falling.

He would have won, or the pride of Tom Norwood's son would have won, had not one of the dogs, driven frantic by the pain of a balled pad, stopped the team to snap viciously at his paw. The cariole halted directly opposite the boy on the bank and only fifteen feet away.

Aaron Cron's gaze did not shift. It was a peculiarly fixed, unblinking stare from beneath heavy, black brows, from above a long, narrow, hooked nose, and the boy could think only of the fierce aspect of a hawk as he strove desperately to keep his own eyes bent upon the silent cripple.

He recalled how his father had often laughed at mention of The Spider. He knew Tom Norwood

had whipped this man when their wits and strength had been matched in that vicious, subtle game of buying fur. He knew there was a family pride in the matter of Aaron Cron and a family scorn of his efforts.

Yet something in that steady, compelling gaze sapped his courage. His thoughts flew to all the strange tales Indians related, to all the rumors that spread so swiftly and so surely through the north country, to the ruthless and implacable actions ascribed to this man before him.

Suddenly Rod shivered from something other than the cold. His eyes turned away despite a supreme effort. He felt the hot blood rush to his cheeks and his head bowed in shame. Then he heard the yip of a straining dog and knew the cariole was in motion. He looked up to see The Spider's back as men and dogs sped down the river.

When they were gone, when the silence of the forest, so much more crushing when the cold is intense, had engulfed him, the boy turned slowly to his task. His fingers trembled so he was forced to beat them on his shoulders before he could resume the work of setting the trap. When he had finished he picked up his ax and started on upstream, into the depths of the great spruce swamp.

It was a trail packed hard by many previous journeys, familiar in every detail. Always Rod had traveled it confidently, proud in ownership, eager to see what each trap might hold. Now all that was

changed. The knowledge that The Spider was in the country had done something to him, had peopled the forest with vague fears. Constantly he caught himself glancing back on the open river or into the dark depths of the swamp on either side, and when a trap was to be reset he did it quickly, without his usual attention to detail.

But Rod was a Norwood, bred through generations in the north, and his father had no fear of The Spider. The boy told himself this, grasped eagerly for the family scorn of the ogre of the wilderness, and he drove himself on up the river, up a branch to the left and at last, when the early night was at hand, through a wide expanse of suddenly eerie swamp.

The moss-draped spruce pressed close about him. The darkness was relieved only by the deep snow. The stillness was profound and seemed resentful of the soft creak of his snowshoes. A great owl, ghostly and silent, swooped past and a moment later Rod started at the familiar but now terrifying shriek of a talon-impaled rabbit.

For a mile the boy fought his terror. At great effort he refrained from a swifter pace. Twice he stopped to remedy an imaginary slip in the lashings of his webs, again to shift an already comfortable pack, and thus, frankly deceiving himself, he emerged at last to see the lights of the post across the clearing. He strode forward eagerly now, proud that he had not run.

Beth Norwood, Rod's ten-year-old sister, was in the

warm living room when he entered it an hour later. Skinning, scraping and stretching the day's catch in the comforting safety of his home had restored his courage.

"The Spider's come!" the girl cried excitedly.

"I passed him up the river," Rod answered with an assumed indifference as he picked up a book. He turned a few pages and then asked casually, "What did dad say?"

"He just laughed," Beth answered. She crept closer, hesitated a moment and then whispered fearfully, "Is it true, Rod, that he sets traps for children and keeps them in a cage until they get fat?"

"Rot! What can he do without legs. That's all bow-and-arrow talk. Dad'll send him packing in a hurry. You watch."

The memory of those black eyes had dimmed in the seclusion of his home. The dark shadows of the spruce swamp had vanished. Rod was again his father's son.

Tom Norwood came in from the trade shop just as Jane, the Indian housekeeper, called the children to supper. He was a big, bearded man, with a voice he could not always keep from roaring and a smile his beard could never quite hide. Tom and Beth stopped half way to their chairs and looked at him with quick interest and a little concern, but that was dissipated the moment they saw his eyes.

Not since the death of their mother the previous winter had they danced so. The children's earliest

recollection was of those eyes, laughing above the beard, kindly, quick and always with the sparkle of daring. For a year they had been dulled. The sadness that had pervaded the wilderness home was in them, and though the children might sometimes forget the gentle mother they never could do so in his presence.

But now the old time sparkle was back and as he glanced at the children their spirits rose in glad response.

"Heard the news?" he asked jovially.

"I passed him up the river," Rod answered casually.

"And he didn't eat you?"

Beth laughed uproariously and the eyes of father and son met in understanding.

"Did he chase you?"

Again Beth laughed. She had absorbed her Indian playmates' zest for cruelty in their humor.

"Daddy," she demanded, "did he ever have any legs?"

She had heard the story several times, a story that was told and retold in countless wigwams and in trading posts, whenever boreal wrath was loosened and the lakes roared and shrieked under the pressure of ninety degrees of frost. The grewsome tales of many people seem to be inspired by storm and cold but in this narration there was a reason.

"It was weather like this when The Spider ——" the tale always began, either in Ojibwa or English,

and no matter how many times it had been heard it always fascinated through its grim horror and grisly details.

Childlike, Beth was always enthralled by the shocking details, yet her father, wise as he was in the ways of fur land, deluded himself with the thought that she had never heard it. He saw in the child a replica of the mother who had come from The States and he sought always to shield her from the rough side of wilderness life as he had tried to shield his wife. To him the sexes were divided sharply, one protective, the other dependent, and he never considered that Beth, born a daughter of the north, might share his own adventurous spirit.

"Oh, I guess Aaron Cron had legs once," he answered. "What did you think? That men were born without legs and they grew afterwards, only his didn't happen to?"

"No," the girl laughed, "but they say ——"

"Don't believe all you hear around a trading post," he interrupted. "As far as Aaron Cron is concerned, he gets fur, and that's what counts in the bush, not legs."

"But daddy? The Indians believe ——"

"Indians! What don't they believe? Evil spirits and thunderbirds and apologizing to a bear for killing him and taking a bath afterward."

"And frogs jumping down your throat and living in your stomach," Rod added quickly and scornfully, as he grinned at Beth.

"Of course!" and Tom Norwood glanced admiringly at his son.

"But daddy! Jane told me——"

"Oh, Jane!" Rod exclaimed. "She believes that if a baby makes a moccasin print in the snow it will bring a snow storm."

"Yes, Indians certainly get a lot of queer notions," Tom Norwood declared. "How'd the traps go today, lad?"

"Two ermine and a mink. An otter's using the branch."

Until Beth's bedtime the two kept it up, adroitly switching the conversation, skillfully dodging her questions. Later, when Tom Norwood had tucked his daughter in bed and put out the light, trying in his awkward fashion to be both father and mother, he returned to the living room and grinned at his son approvingly.

"It ain't a nice story for a girl to hear," he said.

"Then those yarns about The Spider are true?" Rod asked abruptly.

"You haven't been listening to the Indians, too, have you, lad?" Tom laughed. "They've told it so often it's got to be a good story. Guess I'd better give you the truth far as I know it."

To him The Spider's experience was only an incident in the life he had always led and he scorned the embellishments the natives and many others had given it.

Years before, Aaron Cron had come into the wilder-

ness to buy fur. He had begun in a small way, so small his efforts were laughed at by his rivals — yet he possessed patience and unwavering persistence. It was this indomitable will that drove him out among the hunters when they did not come to the small post he erected, that started him on lonely journeys through the desolate forest.

It was on one of these trips in a winter long remembered for the crushing ferocity of the cold that Cron sacrificed his food supply to get the fur of an Indian whose trade had always gone to a rival. He went on, dragging his heavy toboggan, camping where night found him, toiling through the short days and the darkness at either end toward another hunter's camp. He reached the spot, only to find it deserted.

He pressed forward to a third but there, too, the Indians had gone. Cron's food was exhausted now. The cold was so intense nothing was moving and for a day he had not seen the fresh track even of a rabbit. But he went on, beating down the snow with his webs, dragging the heavy load of fur and robes and a few trade articles.

It was the second day without food that he broke through the rotten ice along the shore of a muskeg pond. He got out quickly and he did not think he had wet his feet — they were too cold for him to feel the icy water — and he hurried on, confident he would reach a wigwam on the next lake.

It was the man's will that forced him to this, beat-

ing back reason and experience. He insisted that his feet were not frozen, even as he stumbled on the clumsy, stilt-like affairs that had once been his lower legs. He drove himself, heedless and unsparing, until at the next lake he saw a spark rising in the darkness and knew it came from a hunter's camp.

Before he reached the middle of the lake, which was wider than he thought, he could no longer walk. He crawled, still dragging his toboggan, and at last wormed his way through the snow to the wigwam.

An old woman lived there alone. She had little food, for the rabbits did not move about enough to get into her snares, the cold was so intense, and her home was not weather-tight. But she did the best she could for him, wrapping him in a rabbitskin robe and bathing his feet in cold water to draw out the frost.

But Aaron Cron had waited too long. He should have stopped when he wet his feet. Now they were dead, useless. Though the old woman worked for many hours, she could not bring life back to them.

Aaron would not admit this. He laughed at the old squaw, jeered at her, forced her to redoubled efforts. He fought for his feet. He refused to believe they were dead, killed by the frost. Through the strength of his will he sought to drive blood into them. He would not concede there was a possibility he might never walk again. He denied fiercely that disaster had come.

Lying there in that dreary, filthy wigwam, starv-

ing, freezing, assailed pitilessly by these dread twin allies of the north, he remained blind to defeat until the inevitable happened. Blood poisoning set in.

The man knew what must be done and he did not hesitate. He commanded the woman to cut his legs off above the ankles. She objected. She was old and weak from hunger and in a frenzy Aaron drove her out into the cold with a fusilade of firewood.

When she came crawling back, chilled and weak, he cursed and reviled her, threatened with the wrath of her own savage spirits and of the white man's law, and at last she whetted her butcher knife on a file, brought out an old, rusty saw and prepared to attempt the amputation.

Cron himself twisted down the tourniquets. When everything was ready he sat up on the rabbitskin robe, bracing his body with his hands on the ground behind him, watching, directing, urging, threatening, fighting back groans with curses. Though it was very cold in the wigwam, the sweat streamed down his face.

When the woman had completed her task Cron told her to cauterize the stumps with an ax that had been heating in the fire. This done, he commanded that she boil the remaining rabbit and after it was eaten he lay down to rest.

From that point on there are several variations of of the story. Some said that the man had sought too much, had visioned long stumps that would permit artificial legs. He could not reconcile himself

to the thought of never walking again and had ordered the woman to cut too low.

Medical men said the second operation could not have been performed in the wigwam, that in reality the man should have died after the first. Those who refused to be swayed by the wild legends centering about the old woman's camp, told of a terrible journey far south across the border into the settlements in The States, of an Indian and his dogs driven to exhaustion and death by a cursing maniac on the toboggan, of a surgeon reviled and browbeaten until his judgment succumbed before the might of an unswerving purpose. At least it was certain that Aaron Cron again appeared in the north, legless but still indomitable.

"That's the story," Tom Norwood concluded. "Of course, there's more to it, what the Indians tell, but——" He waved his hand in a gesture of dismissal.

"You mean——? Rod insisted in an awed whisper.

"About the old squaw cooking up his legs because they were starving?" his father laughed. "If you just stop to figure it out you'd see it couldn't have happened. Only Indians believe that."

"That's why they think he's a *windigo?*"

"Of course. And now I'll tell you something. Got it pretty straight. Cron himself started that story. An Indian believes a man who has eaten human flesh becomes a *windigo,* their worst evil spirit,

and that he's liable to do it again and that he can do things none of their medicine can stop."

"And that's why the Mattawa Indians are so afraid of him and don't dare sell their fur to anyone else," Rod added quickly.

"That's it!" Tom exclaimed approvingly.

Rod had heard many rumors of The Spider's rise in fur land. Indians talked of him as if he were their chief evil spirit, the *windigo,* and stories of cruelty, of oppression, of a tyrannical sway over a primitive people, had come from white men as well as red; stories colored by the savage imaginations of the tellers and yet harmonizing with the pitiless nature of the north.

"But how could he do all that without legs?" Rod demanded.

"He didn't have to leave his place. The story was passed around that if the Indians didn't trade with him he'd follow 'em into the bush and eat 'em."

"Then that's all he did?" the boy persisted. "Just got the Indians afraid of him?"

"All this happened to the west and south of here," his father answered, "but I guess I've got it pretty straight. He sat there in his place and the Indians came to him. Others tried 'tripping' but it wasn't any use. Hunters wouldn't give up their fur to anyone but him. They flocked in from a hundred miles and more, bringing every hide and hair they had."

"That's where he got the name of The Spider," Rod interrupted.

"Yes, the Indians gave him that — Ehe-bik. He was like one, and still is, sitting there in the center of a stretch of bush and spinning a web that tangled up all the Indians in reach and holding 'em fast."

"And looking like a spider!"

The wide-eyed boy had uttered the words unconsciously. Tom Norwood glanced at him quickly and then laughed.

"He does, at that. His eyes are black and shining and steady and he just sits there and stares. Looks like he was ready to pounce on anybody that got in his web. They say that if anyone gets caught he never gets out. He's The Spider's meat."

"But he couldn't really hurt anyone, not having any legs," Rod said.

"Aaron Cron's built like a bear, what there is left of him," the fur trader replied, "and I've heard he's a nasty man in a tussle. You can't hit him or grab him, he's so low, and if he ever gets his hands on a man it's the end, they say."

"You mean that time he killed a half-breed?"

"I guess there's more than one he's killed. The law's always been a long way off and there's something queer about him. Losing his legs like he did, I guess. A thing like that kind of makes a man go bad, especially in a country where there's nothing to hold him."

Rod wanted to ask his father if he never had any fear of this man, although he knew he had none. It was the return of The Spider, in his second at-

tempt to win a part of the profitable Norwood fur trade, that was responsible for the sparkle in his father's eyes and Rod knew it.

And yet the boy went to bed that night without being able to escape the thought of the eyes which had looked so steadily, so searchingly, and, he believed, so threateningly, into his. He was ashamed that his own had faltered and turned aside. He resolved that they never would again, but he could not avoid the significance of the story his father had told him.

The grim horror of it had touched Rod only slightly. All his life he had lived in the wilderness and he had learned to accept as commonplace the suffering the north imposed. But as he lay there in bed he could not drive from his mind a picture of what had happened in that wigwam. It was not the gruesome operation itself but the will, the purpose, the rare courage of the man, that held Rod.

It fastened upon his imagination, despite his efforts to see The Spider as simply as did his father, and he wondered if anything could ever stand against Aaron Cron. And then as he remembered his father's laughing acceptance of The Spider's challenge he slipped thankfully into the sleep of childhood, comforted, even while he was ashamed of his own lack of courage, by the thought that big Tom Norwood stood between him and the need of protecting the Norwood dominion from the fierce ambition of such a man.

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Rod was not entirely reassured by his father's high spirits the next morning. The man who had once fought a zealous feudal power found monopoly an insiped thing when he himself held it. He was gripped by a desire for battle that had been fostered through a century of fur land strife.

"It took Aaron seven years to get up nerve enough to tackle us the second time," he chuckled as he and Rod went to the trade shop after breakfast. "I'm glad he held off, though. You're old enough now to take an interest in handing him a licking."

Rod looked at the two log buildings across the bay. Their owner had once been driven out, as Tom Norwood said he would be driven out again, and yet Rod could not banish the vision of those eyes that had beaten down his own on Drowning River.

"But why does he come back?" he asked.

"Plain cussedness," Tom laughed. "One after another, he's driven out every trader in a wide stretch of bush and he can't stand the thought of our staying here and going strong as ever."

An Indian entered and required the trader's attention. Rod, staring out the window, was ashamed

and angry and yet pitifully helpless to conquer with the courage of a thirteen-year-old boy the horrors of his imagination, to combat an awe of that indomitable will which had carried Aaron Cron through the crisis in the old squaw's wigwam.

"We ought to do the decent thing and pay a call on our new neighbor," Tom broke in on his thoughts.

Rod did not turn from the window. He felt his heart stop beating and yet he suffered a greater fear that his father might learn his dread. For the boy was a Norwood. He understood perfectly how fearless his father was, how fearless the Norwoods always had been, how fearless he was expected to be. Hector, the first of the name in fur land, had been with Alexander Mackenzie on his adventurous voyage to the Arctic in 1802. Roderick, his son, had been born on the north shore of Lake Superior that year, had run away as an orphaned boy and for ten years had lived with the Indians around Lake Deception.

There an agent of the Astor company had found him and induced him to buy fur for the Americans. It was thus that Tom had been born in Prairie du Chien, the big depot far south on the Mississippi River. And Tom was only Rod's age when he had gone north with his father in those daring days. They were outlaws in the raids they conducted from the States side of the border, yet it was an outlawry made honorable by the deep-rooted precedents of the

north and rendered gallant by sheer intrepidity, and the courage to carry the attack far into alien territory.

So successful were they with the Ojibwas, among whom Roderick Norwood had lived, that they immediately gained a strong foothold when Canada became a free trading ground in 1871 and had carved out a block of wilderness in which they were absolute monarchs.

It was to this kingdom that The Spider had laid siege when Rod was six years old. He had erected a small post near the Norwood establishment, had made a bid for the trade of a rich district, but he had lasted barely a season. Now he was back again.

All this history, familiar in every detail to the boy, flashed through Rod's mind, leaving an aura of fortitude and self-reliance, of the glad, reckless spirit with which the Norwoods had faced a vast, unknown wilderness and a powerful monopoly. It was his heritage, his the task to uphold a name. Exalted, he turned to his father.

"Let's go now," he said.

"That's the boy!" Tom grinned approvingly. "We'll have a look at this fellow who's scared everybody in a big stretch of bush. We'll poke up this *windigo* and see if he'll bite. And watch him close, lad. Then you'll find out that, like everyone else, he's only a man."

His hand on the boy's shoulder, he opened the door and they went out of the trade shop and down to the ice. And Rod went willingly. All his

life he had passionately admired this big, confident father. There had been little of the usual parent and son relationship between them because Tom had that happy capacity for treating the boy as an equal, making a confidant of him, and also because the isolation of the Norwood post and the lure of the fur trade drew them together.

"We ought to get the habit of going over often," Tom said. "It never does any harm to be friendly. Matter of fact, it pays," and he winked and laughed boisterously.

Rod laughed too, for he knew that this visit, veiled with jovial greetings, aimless talk, banter and a drink or two of Scotch, was part of the ancient game of buying fur. It would permit a close scrutiny of the rival's establishment, a sensing of what was going on, perhaps a disclosure into which a skillful man might lead one of slower wits. By the time they reached the shore the boy was eager for his second meeting with The Spider.

Tom Norwood did not stop to knock. There was a chance their approach had not been seen and a burst of cordiality would excuse an uncermonious entrance.

"Heigh-o, Aaron!" he shouted when a few feet from the door. "Are you here or at the store?"

Without pausing he lifted the latch and went into the house, Rod at his heels.

"There you are, you old sinner! Back again, eh? Well, we have a fine climate around here. Hope you'll enjoy it. Fine view, too. There isn't a prettier lake

in Canada than this, 'specially in summer time. And you're looking well, Aaron. Don't seem a day older than when I saw you last. Have a good trip in? Snow's deeper than usual this year but we never get enough to bother much anyhow."

This was kept up without a pause or even a glance away from the face of the man who sat on the bunk on the opposite side of the room.

The Spider stared back silently, looking not unlike a bust of Buddha. His body was thick, his shoulders broad and heavy, and they hung forward as if from their own weight. His huge head, surmounted by a shock of black hair, seemed to rest in a hollow. No neck was visible.

His eyes, burning and steady, never left Tom's face. Rod, thankful that they had been turned on him only for a moment, wondered that his father could talk so easily or return the stare so nonchalantly.

Tom had ceased speaking and went forward, his hand outstretched.

"How are you, Norwood?" Cron said in a voice as heavy and threatening as his body. He did not seem to see Tom's hand.

"Fine, and glad to see you back. This is my boy, Roderick. Named after his grandfather and born to be a fur trader like his dad."

He reached back and grasped Rod by the shoulder affectionately. The Spider stared at the boy for a moment before he grunted, "How are you, young

fellow?" This time Rod's eyes held steady but he was relieved when Cron turned to Tom.

"Find a seat," he growled. "Jim! Bring a bottle."

The tall half-breed, whom Rod had seen the previous day, entered with Scotch and glasses.

"Here's how!" Tom cried jovially as he lifted his drink. "A long life and a merry one, Aaron."

Cron grunted as he threw the brimming glass of whisky into his mouth with a quick motion. It disappeared as if dumped into a hole and Rod, watching intently, failed to see him swallow or give other evidence of the receipt of so much burning liquid.

Tom set down his glass and began to talk as when he had entered. He retailed all the gossip of three hundred miles of wilderness, commenting freely and humorously, touching on every subject possible except that closest to the hearts of both men.

All the time The Spider sat motionless, staring straight at Norwood. His expression never changed. Occasionally he grunted assent. Rod, watching in fascination, sometimes glanced at his father, amazed that he could endure that cold, hard, threatening gaze without a sign of fear or even of uneasiness.

But the boy was alive, too, to the game Tom was playing. Some of the statements and moves were too subtle for him but in the main he understood and tried to determine the effect upon The Spider. His horror became less as he grew accustomed to being in the man's presence. He began to absorb

something of his father's attitude, which, to him, was marvelously courageous, and yet he had a feeling that Tom Norwood was not accomplishing what he had hoped to. It was as if his lightning-like thrusts were always turned aside by the hard, unassailable mask of the grim, ruthless man on the bunk.

And then, after the third drink, Aaron Cron spoke.

"I'm here to stay this time, Norwood," he declared suddenly as Tom tipped his head back to drain his glass.

It was a direct challenge, an announcement that all the parrying was useless, that, heedless and implacable, he was driving to the heart of the matter. He watched Norwood as he spoke and Rod, following his glance, was proud of his father. Without a start or an ejaculation, with his smile undisturbed, Tom slowly set down his glass and beamed at The Spider.

"Glad to hear it, Aaron!" he exclaimed. "Always liked neighbors."

"My intentions are not neighborly," The Spider retorted grimly.

"Oh, I don't care what a man's intentions are just so he joins me in a glass and a chat occasionally."

"What's the use of this foolishness?" Cron demanded harshly. "You know why I'm here. You know what's happened other places. You're only wasting time pretending to be friendly."

"Aaron," Tom interrupted with a grin, "how do you get any fun out of living?"

"I get it — in my own way. And you won't care to keep on drinking with me when you know what I'm going to do."

There was a deadly quality in his tone that held Rod breathless but Tom only laughed good naturedly.

"No matter what you do, I'll always be glad to have a drink with you," he said.

"No matter what?" Cron took him up quickly.

"No matter what."

"Look here, Norwood," and the huge bulk of the legless man tipped forward on the bunk, "do you mean that? Do you say it knowing we're a long way from the law, that we've got this stretch of bush to ourselves?"

He was staring intently at Tom as he spoke but at the end he suddenly turned his burning black eyes upon Rod. The boy, absorbed in the drama, was startled and, before he could control himself, shrank back. As his eyes fell, he was certain he caught a gleam in The Spider's.

And then his father laughed, so sincerely Rod glanced at him in amazement and admiration. This, the boy knew, was pure joy, not a piece of acting.

"You're a funny one, Aaron!" Tom roared. "It takes you a long time to get to the point."

"Not when I've started."

"Then you're there now?"

"You know it."

"I must o' been dozing," and Tom grinned. "Just what is the point you're driving at?"

"You know what I meant," Cron declared harshly. "We're alone here. It's going to be the end this time. We make our own rules — as we go along."

"That's the rig!" Tom cried heartily. "Make 'em and break 'em any time we want to, eh? Just so we suit ourselves — and the time and the place and all the rest of it?"

"That's it."

"Fine! I'm with you. Suits me right down to the ground. Start now?"

The Spider nodded grimly, his great head rolling in the hollow between his shoulders. Rod shuddered as he watched him.

"All right," Tom agreed. "What you say we seal it with a drink?"

He poured himself one as he spoke and smiled amiably across the glass at Cron.

"Here's regards, Aaron, and good luck."

"Huh!" Cron grunted as he tossed the liquor into his mouth.

Tom Norwood, still smiling, smacked his lips loudly as he set down his glass.

"Well, Roddy!" he exclaimed. "Now that you've seen Aaron you don't think he's so fierce as he's painted, do you?"

The boy straightened in his chair and stared at his father.

"His bark's the worst part of him," Tom continued. "He's got so used to growling at Indians and half-breeds he can't help it when he talks to a white man. Say, Aaron! What's the first thing you're going to do?"

There was a new tone in his voice. He had been perfectly amiable. Now the taunt was unmistakable.

"You know," he continued when Cron did not answer, "there's a lot of things you might do if you was going to forget rules. I could give you a lot of pointers. I'll bet Roddy could, too. Roddy's young but he's the fourth Norwood to be a fur buyer, the third that's been right here at Lake Deception. Did you ever stop to think, Aaron, that there isn't an Indian living in the whole district who can remember when there wasn't a Norwood to trade with?"

"The boy isn't buying fur yet," The Spider growled.

"But don't ever think he won't be soon. He'll be right here long after you and I are gone. And do you know why? Because these Indians around here are educated. They're real smart as Indians go. They're hard to fool. And let me tell you something, Aaron."

The taunting note was gone. Tom leaned forward as if he were imparting a valuable bit of information to an old friend and whispered,

"They don't believe in *windigos*."

For the first time there was a change in The Spider. His great body tipped forward, his hands gripping the edge of the bunk. Rod was appalled by the malevolence of his expression.

But Tom Norwood did not appear to notice. Laughing as amiably as ever, he arose from his chair.

"Got to be going!" he exclaimed just as Cron was about to burst forth. "Glad you're back, Aaron. It's been lonesome around here for quite a while but now things have brightened up. We're going to have a great winter."

"Damn you, Norwood!" The Spider roared. "I'll wipe that grin off your face. And I'll give *you* a bit of advice — I've never yet failed to get what I've started after!"

"Well, well!" Tom laughed. "Never? That makes it all the more interesting. For a hundred years now not a Norwood's ever been licked."

Suddenly The Spider turned his savage glare upon Rod. The boy, intent on the drama, was taken unawares. He tried to hold his eyes steady, understood that the honor of the Norwoods was in his keeping, and then, just as he felt that he could stand the strain no longer, The Spider glanced contemptuously at the father.

"Huh!" he snorted. "But the breed's run out."

"God, but you are a dirty devil!" Tom said in a voice that, though low and flat, somehow expressed

loathing and a terrible anger. "Indians and children are your meat. Scaring them is the best you can do, you gutless skunk. Come on, Roddy, before he smells us up."

Out on the ice the trader strode homeward so swiftly Rod was forced to a dog trot. When they reached the middle of the bay Tom stopped.

"The darned old fool!" he laughed. "But I never thought he'd be so dirty. I wish he had legs. I'd like to smash him for jumping you like that. But I was proud of you, lad, the way you stared right back at him."

"But dad! What does he mean about forgetting the rules?"

"Oh, that! The Spider's like a piece of clear ice when it comes to seeing through him. He thought he'd trapped me into that, didn't he? It was mostly bluff, as they used to say down on the Mississippi when I was a kid, but it means, too, he's thinking of doing things no decent man would do. Lad, we're going to have a great winter."

Rod was silent for a moment. He had come away from that interview with a greater horror of The Spider, a far greater sense of menace, but he had gained, too, an even stronger impression. He looked up at his father with new admiration.

"Rules or no rules, you can lick him, dad," he said.

Tom Norwood chuckled. He continued to chuckle in the days that followed. For the first time since

the death of his wife he became thoroughly alive. And he continued thus, laughing, good natured, until a year later, when The Spider again withdrew from the Norwood domain. To the Norwood children it seemed as if their father was almost sorry to see him go.

3

Rod and Beth followed that second struggle between their father and Aaron Cron with all the fierce partisanship of childhood. Where Tom chuckled they scowled their hatred, where he laughed in the full joy of combat they suffered in piteous suspense.

Yet only Rod was granted access to the details of the warfare.

"Don't tell Beth about it," Tom warned the boy several times. "She's a girl and might get scared. I always kept a lot of things from her mother."

It was part of the game for Rod, this close companionship with his father, this protective attitude toward his sister. Had there been any condescension in Tom Norwood's attitude, Rod, with the sensitive perceptions of a boy in his most defensive period, would have detected and resented it instantly. But he knew his father really wished to include him in the struggle against the man across the bay, to share with him the glory of the combat and to know that once again a Norwood was being groomed for his rightful place.

But not all of Tom Norwood's thoughts were concentrated in the battle for pelts. Before the com-

in of The Spider he had discovered that his educational deficiencies forbade his continuing the children's instruction.

"You'll have to ask Rod," he would confess readily when Beth put a question he could not answer. "Roddy, how's it seem to be a teacher?"

"I like to help her," the boy said once. "Only, what am I going to do when she catches up with me?"

"Grab hold of your own bootstraps and pull," Tom laughed.

But the thought troubled him. He knew what his wife had planned for the children, how she had labored to overcome the disadvantages of their isolation, and he knew she had intended to employ a tutor when she had carried their education as far as she could.

"I've got to get someone in here to help you kids out," he said to Rod one day.

Rod displayed little interest. He was wrapped up in the fight with The Spider. But Tom wrote to a friend in Montreal and the next summer Edgar Parchman arrived. He was well past middle age, a serious, conscientious pedagogue, and a wholly exotic creature in the fur trader's eyes.

Tom watched his progress with mingled emotions. He was determined that his wife's policy should be carried out but he derived no little satisfaction from Parchman's first report.

"The girl has a good mind," the tutor said.

"Quick, original. I expect most satisfactory progress."

"There's nothing the matter with the boy," Tom defended quickly.

"I am sure there isn't. Only I cannot retain his interest. His thoughts are elsewhere."

Tom chuckled and his eyes danced.

"For a hundred years the Norwoods have been buying fur," he said. "It's a habit with them. But don't get discouraged. I think I know what the trouble is."

That fall he redoubled his efforts against The Spider. Rod continued to spend long, rapturous hours with his father but it was years later before he realized how much of the lore of the fur trade had been disclosed to him. Tricks, means of espionage, canny intuition and amazing coups — all of Tom Norwood's fund of experience and abundant resourcefulness — were concentrated in the struggle, and Rod was given an insight into skillful bartering for pelts that had been developed through three generations of ceaseless effort.

And it was the eager boy who discovered that victory had been achieved. In the late darkness of a winter morning he looked across the bay and saw there was no light at Aaron Cron's post. When dawn came no smoke arose from the dwelling house chimney.

"He's gone, dad!" he cried exultantly. "He's quit."

Later they crossed the bay and found the place deserted, the buildings locked.

"Same's he did the first time," Tom said. "Snuck out in the dark."

"Guess he's learned his lesson now," Rod announced proudly. "He can't lick the Norwoods."

That evening after the children had gone to bed Tom spoke to Parchman.

"Take a new try at the lad," he suggested. "He'll have more time to think about books now."

The tutor had already come to certain conclusions in regard to Rod and he took quick advantage of The Spider's departure. Skillfully and yet sincerely, for the man was consumed by a love for literature so beautifully passionate it was infectious, he turned the boy's energy and enthusiasm from fur to books.

Parchman not only taught Rod what to read but how. He unearthed hidden beauties, aroused an interest and, when he found quick response and ready appreciation, lavished the rich gleanings of a lifetime's thought and study upon the wilderness lad.

There was nothing incongruous in this new enthusiasm of a boy who was the product of a century of the isolation, intense struggle and uncultured influences of fur land. Tom Norwood was a romantic figure when, soon after the firm establishment of his post, he had gone east on business. When he returned he brought with him as his bride a woman as unfitted for life in a trading post as an orchid for growth in a muskeg swamp.

Yet there was nothing of the orchid's fragility in Janet Knox. Her devotion to Tom Norwood may have kept her in the wilderness but it did not force her to accept it as she saw it. In the beginning it seemed a pitifully weak effort, this attempt to transplant something of the life she had always known to the sterile soil of a northern home, and in those first years she was often forced to hide her despair from her husband.

But when Rod was old enough to gain his first impressions, she had achieved so much that the boy never realized the foreign nature of many things at the Norwood post. He grew up in an atmosphere of books and magazines and pictures as well as of pelts and canoes and snowshoes — of gentleness and love and a passionate family devotion.

It was Tom Norwood's memory of those years of patient effort that made him open his home to a man like Edgar Parchman, even though it meant a break in the completeness of his companionship with his son. A puzzled, wistful look crept into his eyes as he listened to Rod's eager discussions with his tutor, or when he burst into the dwelling house with plans for a wilderness journey and found his son immersed in a new packet of magazines or books. Yet he never voiced his protest. He carried out the mother's program with dogged determination and a patient postponement of his own dreams and wishes.

Rod was sixteen when Parchman announced that he was ready for preparatory school.

"He's well grounded, sir," the tutor said proudly. "He can enter the third year of any institution in the country. And I think you'll find he has an appreciation beyond his years."

Tom nodded gravely and turned to his son.

"That means six more years and you'll be finished," he said. "It's what your mother wanted — and I guess she was right. I've never had much schooling but that's never made me think it hurt a man. Learn all you can and when you get back we'll build a little Hudson's Bay of our own. Six years ain't so long when you're busy."

Rod knew a protest would make his father happy, would deaden some of the pain of the separation which faced them, but he did not make it. He was glowing with curiosity and eagerness and he could not keep it from his eyes.

Tom saw it for he sighed and said: "Never mind. It's only right that you should want to go. You'll make a better fur trader for having had the fling outside."

"But I'm coming back for a vacation," Rod said. "It won't really be six years."

"Sure. The Canadian Pacific will come through before long and then it will be easy for you to get in. Soon as it does I'm going to send Beth out to a girl's school."

"But daddy!" his daughter protested. "That would leave you all alone."

"Not for long, though. Rod will be through col-

lege when he's twenty-two and then we're going to make things lively in this stretch of bush."

Tom Norwood was ready to put certain long considered plans into effect three years later, when The Spider suddenly appeared again.

"Come to stay this time, Aaron?" Tom asked when he paid his customary first call.

The Spider had not changed. He sat on his bunk, his great head rolling between his huge shoulders, glaring fiercely from beneath his black brows.

"I've never quit yet," he growled.

"So! Just a vacation you took the last two times, eh?"

"I never take a vacation, Norwood."

"No? You're a deep one, Aaron. Never could understand what you mean. But I'm glad you came. Getting lonesome around here with Rod and Beth gone to school. I was thinking of paying *you* a visit. Guess I will when Rod gets through college. Let him run this place."

"Huh!" The Spider grunted, but there was a gleam in his eyes that did not escape Tom.

Cron hung on longer in this, his third, onslaught. For two years Tom carried the fight with all the Norwood zest for conflict and in the end he again saw the buildings across the bay deserted. The next summer Rod returned with a college diploma. Beth, who had been in a girl's school in Toronto, accompanied him.

For a week there was a joyous reunion at Lake

Deception. It was the first time the three had been together since Rod went off to school, except for one vacation, and there were years to cover — years which Rod found unexpectedly difficult to bridge, for until his return he had not realized how far the last six years had carried him from the activities and interests of his boyhood.

Tom Norwood had changed little. He was still the great, bearded, handsome man, buoyant and confident. But all his exhaustless energy had poured out in one direction while Rod, who had inherited his father's zest for life and his questioning eagerness, had discovered fields of interest of which his father never dreamed. They had only one point in common — their love and admiration for each other.

The father had never written of his loneliness but the preparation he had made for their coming and his eager attempts to draw them back into his life told of it. Beth was not allowed to give Jane more than a hurried greeting before he had led her to the living room and pointed to a piano.

"Look!" he exclaimed proudly. "Had it packed in this spring. Didn't want you to get lonesome through the summer."

"Daddy!" Beth, small, dark and ardent, slipped into his arms. "You darling! You'll spoil me so I'll never want to leave you."

"Maybe you won't have to in a few more years. Besides, Rod and me'll need a little music. I've got a present for him, too. Tell you about it later."

He turned and slapped his son on the shoulder. "Getting that education didn't stunt you much," he laughed. "Might stand a little filling out but that will come. You've got my head and shoulders but your mother's eyes. Ho, Jane! Is supper ready? She's been working for a week and if there's anything you like she hasn't cooked for you it's only because she didn't have the stuff."

In the days that followed the three were always together. The dwelling house echoed with their laughter. Beth reduced the Indian women to adoring nuisances around the kitchen while Rod, who had inherited his father's capacity for making friends, received the homage due a young monarch returning to his rightful kingdom.

George Paul, old half-breed employe, shook hands delightedly and then, turning to Tom, spoke in rapid Ojibwa. Rod, a bit puzzled, looked at his father.

"Forgotten your Indian?" Tom laughed. "Never mind. It'll come back. He says you're like old Roderick. And you are, only I never noticed it. What did you think, George? That getting a little education would change a Norwood? He's going to show the bush what fur trading is. Books and study are all right but there's a time to end it, isn't there, lad?"

Rod did not answer. He had always known that his father counted confidently on his being a fur man but until his return he had not realized how much the parent's happiness depended on the continuance

of the Norwood line of traders. Rod's six years outside, the years that had shaped his own interests and ambitions, had been for Tom only a sentimental tribute to his wife. It was unfair and yet Rod was unconcerned with the injustice of it. He thought only of the pain he knew he must bring to the man who loved him and whom he still regarded with the fond worship of his boyhood. Sick at heart, he avoided the subject for a few days, only to be brought face to face with it at last.

"You never asked about the present I got for you," Tom said when they were alone in the trade shop one morning. "Remember what I always said about branching out? Well, I waited for you. Got it started just last fall — the second Norwood post. But it's only going to be the beginning. We'll show them ——"

He would have rushed on with the plans of six lonely years but something in Rod's face stopped him. For a week the young man had been trying to phrase his own decision kindly but now that the time had come he could manage nothing except the short and brutal truth.

"But dad! I don't want to be a fur trader."

Though schooled through life to hide his thoughts, Tom Norwood was unequal to the situation.

"You mean you don't want to go on here with me?" he demanded incredulously.

"I mean I want to go to New York this winter, to work there."

The trader turned slowly to the shelves and began to rearrange some bolts of woolen plaids.

"What kind of work was you planning on doing?" he asked at last.

"Ultimately I want to write. First, I want to take a year of post-graduate work in New York. I was editor of the college monthly last year, you remember, and ——"

"Write!" Tom roared. "You mean write stories?"

"Novels, but just now essays of pioneering criticism."

Tom considered this statement thoughtfully.

"Ain't there enough novels written already?" he finally demanded. "They've been good enough for you until now. Seems to me that was all you and Parchman used to talk about."

Rod smiled but there was nothing contemptuous in the smile, for he was too clear visioned to see anything ludicrous in big Tom Norwood. Yet he was a youth, a crusader with a message.

"The expression of a people is never finished," he said eagerly. "America is growing up, developing wonderfully, but it is still dominated by England's Victorian slush and the prudery of the Puritans, by sentimentality and insincerity. Now we have come to the age of realism, an acknowledgment of truth, a refusal to pamper longer to vapid, maudlin taste. I know it doesn't sound like a real man's work to you but ——"

"It don't sound like anything for a Norwood," his father interrupted.

"But there are real men in it!" Rod protested. "I am only one of many, of those who realize what must be done if we are to take our place as a nation whose literature commands respect. There is to be a magazine of criticisms first of all and I have been asked to be one of the editors. We hope to start within a year."

"Look here!" Tom broke in harshly. "I don't want to even hear about it. Couldn't understand it if I did. And I don't believe any bunch of college boys is going to turn the world upside down just because they think it ought to be done. People are going to go on reading the same things, just like they wear the same furs and eat the same food and live in the same houses. But if you're telling me that you won't take hold up here with me like I counted on, I want to know it."

Rod knew what was behind that question — the pride in the succession of Norwoods who had ruled over a small kingdom, the dream of a continued dynasty, of a larger power, of coöperation and mutual achievement — and he knew his answer must shatter the dream of a lifetime. He had begun resolutely enough with his first announcement. Now he hesitated.

"You needn't say it!" the fur trader roared as he leaped over the counter and confronted his son. "If the fur business isn't good enough for you, if

you've got so filled up with fancy notions in that damned college, go ahead. Go write those books you talk about but they've got to be better than you can write to make the living the fur trade's given you. Write! Bah! A Norwood writing books!"

He rushed out of the shop and down the shore toward the line of wigwams stretched along the bay. His head was up but his big shoulders slumped in pitiful contrast to that last wrathful outburst.

Rod watched him with a lump in his throat. For the first time in his life his father had been really angry with him and yet the words had left no rancor. Rather he was appalled by the power of one individual to hurt another so, to tear down the dreams of a lifetime. He still felt the unfairness and injustice of it and yet his release had brought no sense of triumph. He walked slowly across to the house and found Beth in the living room.

"I've done it," he announced shortly. "And it was worse than I expected."

"Oh, Rod!" the girl cried. "Why did you have to tell him now, just when he was so happy?"

"It was only fair. I couldn't have him go on planning on my staying."

"But why couldn't you have waited. He'll be broken-hearted."

"I put it off as long as I could but he began talking about the new post he has opened. That was to have been my present."

"Poor daddy!" the girl exclaimed. "It has been

his dream so long, his grandfather, his father, himself and then you. He used to talk about it so much when you first went out. He was just like a boy about it."

"Don't make it any harder, Beth!" Rod interrupted irritably. "It was like cutting off an arm."

The girl was silent. Her adoration for her father was a flaming, passionate thing and now she suffered with him.

"Do you have to do this?" she demanded at last. "It will kill him, rob him of everything he's worked for. Isn't there some other way?"

"Don't you suppose that if there were I would have thought of it? I've been over it so many times."

"But couldn't you write up here?" Beth suggested timidly. "Then you could do both, please father and ——"

"No!" Rod exclaimed passionately. "You don't know what you're asking. It isn't just the fur trade. It's the country. Two years of it would kill all the ambition in me. Don't you see? Dad and I are different. He loves it, loves the fighting, gets something out of this eternal struggle. I couldn't. I've got to be down there where others are thinking as I think, striving for the same things. Why, just knowing a man like Jerome Carstens is better than a college education!"

Rod rushed on, pouring out his heart, saying things he had only felt, laying bare a dream that had grown

to something so big and so compelling it dominated him completely. He was incoherent in places, some of his statements were irrelevant, but he did convey a sense of passionate longing, of youthful ardor, of that fiery zeal and flawless confidence of new-fledged manhood.

Beth, nineteen, still entranced by her own first view of the great world outside, was moved as Rod always had the power to move her.

"I'm afraid it will nearly kill father but I think you ought to do it," she said gently when he had finished.

4

For a long time after Rod left her to go to his room, Beth sat staring across the lake. At last she arose and walked over to the trade shop, where she found Tom Norwood pacing the floor.

"Daddy," she began at once, "you're not going to make it hard for Rod, are you?"

He stopped and looked at her and then demanded harshly:

"Did he send you over here?"

"That's not like you."

She halted him beside a bench, pushed him down and sat on his knee.

"I understand, dear," the girl said gently. "It's all you've thought of. It never occurred to you there might be something else. And it must hurt terribly. But I think it would hurt Rod more."

"More! What do you mean?"

"I don't know that I quite understand it but it will break his heart if he doesn't go back. It's something more than a mere wish. It's a passion."

"Rod's young. He's just at the age when wishes seem the biggest thing in the world. He'll get over it."

"That's where you're wrong, daddy. It's not like a boy wanting to be a sailor or a soldier when he grows up. It isn't a wish Rod has. It's something driving him from inside."

"But he just thinks he wants to write books," Tom protested. "He's too young to know anything to write about. No, he's had a good time in college and he wants to keep on having it. What he needs is a fight, being backed into a corner, and I could give him that. I've got it all fixed to go after Cron."

"Daddy! You don't understand Rod. This isn't a whim. He's — he's like a — why, like a painter or a — a poet. He talked a lot on the train and when we came in from the railroad. He's an artist. There's something inside him, something he's got to do, and ——"

She paused in her breathless explanation, conscious of her inability to give even an impression of the idea Rod had conveyed to her, but Tom did not comment.

"And it isn't just what he got in college," the girl continued. "He had it before he left. Even when he was a boy he began to feel it."

"How'd he ever get anything like that up here in the bush?" Tom demanded.

"Why, daddy, you ought to know," Beth said gently.

Tom Norwood started.

"You mean his mother?"

"Of course. Everyone has to have two parents."

Big, sometimes boisterous, roughened by constant contact with primitive things, often uncouth, there still remained a fine, clear streak of gentleness in the fur trader. It was what had attracted Janet Knox; it was what had won the warm affection of his children. For coupled with it was a keen perception and a generosity of spirit that provided a broader basis of understanding than his single-purposed life might have been expected to develop.

And now something never before thought of was disclosed to him. He had lived in a world where the sexes were separated by instincts, pursuits and desires, where men were like their fathers, women like their mothers. He had taken it for granted that Rod would be like him, would wish the same things, live the same life. That very attitude had blinded him always to the vast difference between them.

"Beth," he suddenly burst forth, "your mother was a very wonderful woman."

The girl nodded.

"And the most wonderful thing about her was that she could come up here and live in the bush without anything she had ever had. It — it must 'a been hell."

Again Beth's head was lowered in silence.

"There were things she wanted, people she wanted to see and talk to, pictures she wanted to look at and music she wanted to hear.

"I remember once in New York, when I first saw her, at a concert. She sat there as if she was in a dream. She was stiff. Didn't seem to breathe. Just listened with eyes staring.

"I always knew she could feel things I couldn't. She knew things I didn't know. I've seen her stand and watch a sunset that only meant rain the next day and that evening she'd be a different person, all alive and so soft and dreamy. And flowers! How she'd fight to make 'em grow, only to have the frost cut 'em down time after time. I always knew it was hell for her here."

He was silent for a moment and Beth sat perfectly still, only glancing furtively at his bowed head and brooding eyes.

"When she died, and ever since, I've thought it was wrong to bring her into the bush. I knew it when it was too late. I'd have done anything to make it up to her. That's why I got that tutor, like she planned, and sent you both out to school. I've tried to keep things going just like she wanted them and now ——"

He broke off abruptly and grasped Beth by the shoulders.

"She'd have been for Rod in this, wouldn't she?" he demanded. "She'd have known and understood him. She'd have said 'yes.' And I — why this is my chance."

"Daddy!"

He arose, picking her up in his arms. Then he

set her down on the floor behind the counter and tumbled a great heap of blankets upon her. When she had extricated herself he was gone. Beth smiled all the while she slowly repiled the blankets.

Tom Norwood rushed out of the trade shop and across to the dwelling house.

"Rod, you forgot how to bale fur?" he demanded as he burst into the living room.

"No," the young man laughed. "Want help?"

"A lot of it. I'm way behind. Got all excited about you and Beth coming back and didn't keep things in shape. The whole summer's going to be a rush now."

"Having a new post makes a lot more work."

"Yes," and Tom's smile hid the quick pain, for it was that work he expected Rod to take over, "but I've got a good man there. Guess you don't remember him — Andy Parr. Old timer. Worked for your grandfather and me before you was born. We brought him up from Prairie du Chien when he was only a lad. He's no great shakes in starting things but he knows how to do what you tell him. He's getting along pretty well, considering that we're tapping The Spider's territory."

"When did you start? Last year?"

"Yes, right after The Spider was here."

"Here!" Rod exclaimed. "Again! You never wrote ——"

"Nothing to write about. He tried it again. Third time. Lasted a little longer but he finally

went. I think that will finish him, now that we're tackling him on his home grounds. He ought to know by this time that he can't lick a Norwood."

Rod was silent. To him the story of The Spider had always been more than just a grisly legend of fur land. It had been an augural symbol of the sinister, ruthless, indomitable spirit of Aaron Cron.

And now when he learned that the man had tried a third time to wreck the Norwood fortunes Rod, remembering the will that had ruled in that lonely wigwam, wondered at his father's confident belief that such a spirit was defeated.

"The darned old fool gave me a good tussle this time but he didn't get much fur," said Tom. "Stubborn idiot, Aaron is. But come over to the store. I want a hand with that fur. And," he stopped and looked back with a grin, "be careful how you do it, lad. Check every piece. It's those pelts that'll be taking you to New York."

That was the last reference Tom made to the subject. Once Rod reopened it with an embarrassed attempt to express his appreciation. His father stopped him by gripping his shoulder and leading him to a window. Silently he pointed to the low, rocky ridge back of the post, to the crest where his wife had been buried ten years before.

Rod plunged into the summer activities with an energy and enthusiasm which, while they pleased his father, also caused pain. It was what the fur trader had always wished and this, he knew, would be the

last time his son would work at his side. Rod was given charge of the brigade, operating the small fleet of freight canoes in which the fur was taken to the railroad and in which the winter's supplies were brought back. When this was finished there were a number of things about the post to be done, after which he went to his father.

"How about the books?" he asked. "Can't I get them straightened out for you?"

"Straightened out?" Tom repeated after a quick glance.

"I remember how you always growled about the bookkeeping."

"Oh, I've got pretty clever at that. Got 'em in shape while you were taking out the fur. Balanced them down to $68, which is the best I ever did," and he laughed. "No, we're about cleaned up now. Ready for fall. When do you want to go?"

"I'd like to get away the end of next week."

"All right. Beth will be ready then. She's talking a little of staying this winter."

"Staying here! Why, she ought not——"

"Of course she oughtn't. She's got to go. Beth is — well, she's like her mother. She stuck it out because she thought she ought to, that and you kids.

"That's one reason why I want Beth to go back to school. I never knew exactly what your mother must have suffered, living here in the bush. And Beth — Beth's her daughter and I'm not going to have her suffer, too. Beth's like her. She'll want the outside

and all she can get there and can't get here."

That last week was one of outward gaiety in which all three strove to conceal the quick wrenches of the pain to come. The northern wilderness is a measureless, empty expanse and its sheer loneliness drives the few who dare it to closer bonds. Now in the Norwood post the three people facing a separation which promised to stretch through the years were greedy for every moment of companionship.

Tom was as jovial as in the days when The Spider had laid seige at his door. Rod, knowing what lay behind the bluff heartiness, was constantly in his father's company. Beth, responding to Tom's lead, was gayest of the three but the last night she broke down.

It was Tom himself who finally persuaded her, scoffing at her incoherent arguments, overriding her objections, insisting that the plans already made be carried out. And the next morning when brother and sister, seated together in a canoe manned by two Indians, departed for the railroad, the fur trader stood on the dock and shouted his exaggerated woodsman's warnings of the dangers of a great city. They still heard his laugh when they turned the point on which Aaron Cron had built his post so many years before and Rod, glancing back, was forced to include in his last glimpse those two squat, ugly log buildings.

Beth was weeping.

"We shouldn't leave him!" she sobbed. "We shouldn't."

Rod did not answer. He was staring at the twin trading establishments, so symbolical of the everlasting struggle of fur land. He wondered if The Spider would come again, driven by his determination to crush the Norwoods, and even while he experienced a great relief that he would never have to take up the battle he was conscious of a twinge of self-reproach.

The thought remained and it was not until he changed from canoe to train and glanced back at the wilderness from which he was escaping forever that his mind turned at last to New York and what he hoped to accomplish there.

Rod had chosen Columbia for his post-graduate work largely because it would take him to the metropolis and the literary atmosphere he expected to find there, and also because it had been suggested by Jerome Carstens, an English instructor at college, the leader of the group which had planned a magazine of constructive criticism as the first step in a campaign to transform American letters.

Carstens had abandoned his university post for book reviewing and lecturing to anyone who would listen in the French restaurants he frequented. There was no denying the man's personality. With a pint of red wine inside him, he talked marvelously from the viewpoint of the immature minds that clustered about him in those changing days of the middle nineties.

His influence over Rod became complete that first

winter. To the young Canadian he seemed a courageous, brilliant apostle of truth and the new order, a man battling conspiracy, obtuseness and the other accepted forces of Philistia, one destined for greatness but denied the opportunity.

After his year of post-graduate work Rod moved into quarters with Carstens and began what he felt was to be his career. The magazine was still a thing of the future. Publishers had combined to discourage it, Carstens declared, but Rod was happy nevertheless. He sat up all night to talk and listen, he frequently drank too much, and he developed the habit, cultivated by Carstens' subtle methods, of paying most of the checks and frequently all of the rent.

The fall and most of the winter passed in this manner with nothing written.

"Live first, my boy," his mentor urged, whenever Rod made a new resolution that he would settle down to real creative affort. "Literature can only be a picture of life. If you know nothing of life, how can you paint it?"

"But I'm wasting time."

"Time! I'm fifteen years older than you. I have yet to write a word of anything except criticism, and I have never wasted a moment. But here," and he tapped his forehead, "here is a storehouse to which every moment has added its mite, a storehouse which some day will burst, spill out its seasoned riches. There will be none of the cheap sentimentality of

youth, none of the maudlin groping which marks this closing decade of the nineteenth century. When I begin to write, my boy, a new era will dawn."

He said it whimsically and with exaggerated pomposity, his lean fingers extended and tapping against each other, but at the end he suddenly shook a fist at Rod.

"Write!" he shouted. "Bah! You have nothing but form. I mean it when I say wait. You can. Your father will support you. Don't sharpen a pencil for ten years."

Greatly as he respected Carstens' advice, Rod rebelled several times that winter. He sharpened his pencil. There was one period of three weeks when he worked ceaselessly. Carstens read the result and then calmly tore the manuscript into bits.

"Some day you will thank me for this," he said as he tossed the pieces into the fire.

It was inevitable that when spring came Rod should try again. There was another feverish outburst, a period of remorseless application that ended abruptly when a telegram arrived. It read:

"Your father killed by falling tree week ago.
"Andy Parr."

5

"My dear boy!" Carstens exclaimed when he had read the telegram. "This — this is most distressing. I'm terribly sorry, terribly."

Rod still stood in the middle of the room. Apparently he had not heard.

"A shocking blow!" the older man continued. "And yet in your case it has been softened, I imagine, by the fact that you have always been prepared, in a way, for such an eventuality. Life in the wilderness means peril, of course, constant peril."

"No," Rod said slowly, "I wasn't prepared. There was no danger in the bush for dad. He had always lived there."

"But accidents ——"

"He was equal to any situation!" Rod burst forth passionately. "He was so big, so full of life! He could out-travel an Indian. He was wonderful! A — a man! And to think that — hit by a falling tree — without a chance ——"

"Of course. I understand. It's a fine thing for a man's greatest hero to be his father. But it's done now. You'll have to accept it. Now about trains. And your sister. I'll help you pack."

"There is a train for Toronto to-night. I'll wire Beth. She can meet me, go on with me."

Carstens sat down at the table and wrote the telegram.

"There," he said when he had finished. "Told her your father was ill. I'll run out and get this off right away."

When he came back ten minutes later Rod still stood in the middle of the floor. Carstens brought a suit case from a closet and began to pack it with Rod's clothing.

"It will be quite a journey, I imagine," he said. "Needn't expect you back for two or three weeks, eh?"

"Not before then," Rod answered dully, and then he started. "Why, I can't tell! There's the post. No one to run it. I don't know what I'll have to do there."

"You mean you'll have to stay and operate the business?" Carstens demanded.

"Perhaps. I hadn't thought about that part of it. I haven't been able to think of anything except ——"

"Yes, yes," Carstens interrupted. "I had imagined there would be some matters for you to settle. But surely your father must have someone you can trust to take care of things for you."

"No one but a half-breed and he couldn't run a post. You see, spring is an important season. Large advances have been made to the hunters and the fur must be taken in and shipped."

"But you don't mean you'll stay and manage it yourself?" Carstens demanded in quick dismay.

"I tell you, I don't know." A note of irritation had crept into Rod's voice. "I'm not thinking of myself. I've got to do what's best for Beth. She's dependent on the business."

"Pardon me, old man," and Castens laid a hand on Rod's shoulder. "I don't mean to rasp you with my questions. It was of you I was thinking. Going up there in this mood, you're capable of making almost any sort of foolish sacrifice. I was only trying to help you look at this thing sanely."

Carstens' tone made Rod ashamed of his petulance. "I'm trying to," he said. "Don't you think I realize how futile it would be to go back now when dad isn't there to know it? But if I'd only seen what was going to happen! Just two years! I'd have given them gladly. Two years while he was up there all alone and I was down here——" He hesitated and then finished bitterly, "Doing nothing."

"Come! Come! Brace up! You're unfair to yourself. How can you know now what those two years may have accomplished? They've been only a preparation. When you get back here after selling the post——"

"Sell the post!" Rod cried.

It was an involuntary protest, so instinctive and so vehement that Carstens glanced at him quickly.

But Rod was not aware of it. To sell the Norwood post, the result of three generations of toil and

struggle, to have it pass out of the family! Even to have the thought put into words seemed appalling.

"Is there any other solution of your problem?" Carstens asked. "You wish, as I understand it, to see your sister provided for."

Rod started, but could only nod his head.

"You decided years ago that you would never be a fur trader. Then why the indecision?"

"But you don't know what it means!" Rod protested. "Somehow, with dad there, it was different. Now it's like — like tearing down a monument. You don't understand. You can't unless you know the history of the fur trade."

"Then, as I understand it, because your father and your grandfather have been handing out tin hatchets and beads for two generations, its up to you to squander all your gifts and continue to do likewise as you're the only Norwood left. That isn't like you, boy. It's a piece of maudlin sentimentality, cheap melodrama. Is that your idea of family loyalty? Instead of making the Norwood name in a world that counts, you'd bury ——"

"No!" Rod interrupted. "I hadn't gone that far. I was only wondering if anything I can ever do will justify it. With a Norwood left, I had a right to take my chance. Now it's different. I can't tear down to make a failure. I must succeed and — and I will. I'm coming back to write as I never did before."

"Good!" Carstens slapped him on the shoulder. "I knew you'd see it. Use what your father's given

you to go ahead, not backward. What's the value of a trading post like that?"

"Several years ago dad said it was worth $50,000 easily."

"And it has always been successful?" Carstens asked eagerly.

"Successful!" Rod repeated. "Every trader who's tried to get a foothold has been licked."

"A monopoly, eh? That's great. But take the old figure. Invest that in safe securities. That means $2,500 a year. It will take care of your sister and give you an income while you make your place."

Carstens struck the table with his fist.

"Go up there and sell that post!" he exclaimed. "Be hard! Don't compromise with anything. Remember that art stands above all else. There may be genius in you, boy. I suspect there is. Don't stifle it with false conceptions of duty. Be yourself."

"I intend to be," Rod declared.

"And another thing. Don't stay up there too long. A month should be enough. The roughness and uncouthness of that country will blight everything in you, deaden you. I can't have that happen."

"Do you suppose I want to stay?" Rod burst forth. "Do you suppose I'd have failed dad just for a whim? Ever since I went to college I've wanted things I couldn't get in the bush."

He looked about the room, recalling the countless hours he had spent there, the gatherings of clever, congenial souls, the passionate joy of those intent days

of writing, the gay dinners and the endless talk, so bright and stimulating.

Carstens was watching him and he said, "Sinton will be back from Paris next week. You never knew him, or what brilliant discourse can be."

Rod glanced up quickly. He had heard much of Sinton, had read many of his letters. His own letters to Beth had been patterned on them and his greatest envy was of those amazingly scintilating missives from France.

"Don't worry!" he exclaimed decisively. "I won't stay long. I'll be back this summer."

Carstens took him to the train. He was sympathetic again but his last words were, "I'll expect you before June."

On the way to Toronto, Rod got hold of himself. Beth met him but it was not until they were on the train, westward bound, that he told her the truth. For the remainder of the day his own grief was forgotten in his efforts to comfort her.

"We shouldn't have left," she repeated again and again. "We can never do anything for him now. Oh, Rod! If we had only staid at home!"

"Don't, Beth. You're not to blame. He insisted on your going. He wanted it."

"Yes, but——"

"Please, dear. I'm the one who should have remained. It was the thing he wanted most."

When they left the train at Heathcote they were met by a half-breed with a dog team. Rod did not

remember ever having seen the man, who explained that he had been sent directly from the new post by Andy Parr. Later, while Beth was changing her clothes in the little log hotel, Rod attempted to learn some of the details of his father's death but the only answer he could obtain was that ever maddening Ojibwa "*kah-win ken-don,*" "I don't know."

The first spring days had come in New York but at Heathcote there was only a slight lessening of winter's grip. An early thaw had melted some of the snow on the ice but now the temperature was again below zero. The ice was as thick as ever and it offered a hard, smooth surface over which the dogs were able to gallop with a heavy load. The journey was made in record time.

It was two weeks after Tom Norwood's death when Rod and Beth reached home. The last few miles were along the shore of Lake Deception and scenes more and more familiar flashed past. When they rounded a long point for the final mile Rod instinctively glanced ahead, as he had so many times at that same spot.

Directly in front, on the short point which shut off a view of the Norwood post, were the two ugly, squat log buildings Aaron Cron had erected so long before. From one of them a thin column of smoke was rising.

Beth was on the toboggan and Rod and the half-breed were running behind. The young man halted and grasped the driver's arm.

"Who is living there?" he demanded.

"Ehe-bik," was the reply. "The Spider, he come back last fall," and he started on after the dogs, which were racing frantically now and yelping in anticipation of the journey's end.

Rod stood there for a moment. His boyhood dread of Aaron Cron was gone. He had not even thought of the man for a long time, but now, though the unforgettable tales of the Indians failed to inspire the childish terror, the memory of the scene in the squaw's wigwam remained, carrying with it that same impression of a will and a tenacity that seemed scarcely human.

Tom Norwood, always confident in the face of The Spider's attack, was dead, and Cron, resistless and indomitable, was still carrying the fight to the very center of the Norwood stronghold. Whether he succeeded in winning the Norwood Indians or not, his mere presence affected the Norwood fortunes.

For with The Spider there a monopoly could not be claimed and the sale of the post, which Rod had determined to carry out, would be far more difficult and less advantageous. Few men acquainted with the fur trade would care to risk much in a struggle with The Spider.

At the post brother and sister were met by Andy Parr. Rod had seen him two years before but he remembered him most from Tom Norwood's description — "no great shakes at starting things but knows how to do what you tell him" — and when they shook

hands the young man found him sympathetic, quietly efficient and anxious in an awkward, embarrassed fashion to save them from as many distressing features of their father's death as possible.

"Where is he?" Beth demanded in a low voice, as soon as she had removed her heavy outer garments and was warming herself by the living room stove.

"I didn't want to seem high-handed," Parr answered gently, "but there was nothing else to do. It's two week's now since it happened."

"You mean — ?" and Rod nodded in the direction of the ridge behind the post.

"Yes."

Parr glanced significantly at Rod but Beth looked up and caught the expression.

"Don't try to keep anything from me!" she cried.

"Course not," Parr assured her. "There's not much to tell. Tom came over to the new post on Black Sturgeon Lake two weeks ago last Sunday. It stormed bad and he waited four days until it quit. Then he started home Friday morning with two dogs. One of them came in here alone with chewed traces and George Paul started right back. Thirty miles out he found a dead popple across the trail."

"And —" Beth insisted when he stopped.

"Tom lay beside it. It had hit him on the head and caught an arm and a leg."

Rod stepped behind Beth's chair and warned Parr with a shake of his head but Beth whirled and saw her brother's action.

"Don't!" she cried. "I must hear it some time. I want to hear it now."

"There's not much more to tell," Parr said. "George slung the — slung Tom in a tree and went on to Black Sturgeon to tell me. I was away, 'tripping,' and he left a message. Soon's I got back I started a man out to Heathcote to send a telegram and bring you in and then I come over here. George had brought Tom back. That's all, except my not waiting for you to come."

"But you should have waited!" Beth cried. "Now — now ——"

The girl broke down completely and as she bowed her head Parr looked steadily at Rod and made a minute lateral motion with his head.

"I'm sorry," he said humbly. "I tried to do the right thing but I couldn't tell when you'd get here, and then — the weather ——"

"Of course," Rod interrupted quickly. "He was justified, Beth. There was nothing else to do."

"You took him up there?" the girl asked. "Beside mother?"

"Yes, I thought it was what you'd want that I should do," said Andy.

"Listen, dear," and Rod helped his sister to her feet. "You'll want to get into some other clothes before supper. And you know the worst now. There's no reason to distress yourself needlessly."

He led her into the hall and when he heard her bedroom door close he turned to Parr.

"We'd better get over to the trade shop," the older man suggested quickly.

"What was it?" Rod demanded the moment they were outside. "Did the — the wolves —— ?"

"Yes. George drove them off. It wasn't bad. He said they'd just gotten there. That's why I didn't wait."

"Oh, God!" Rod groaned. "That! To dad!"

He stopped and whirled upon Parr.

"Don't ever let Beth know!" he exclaimed. "Tell George to keep quiet."

"I wasn't going to tell even you."

Rod did not speak again until the trade shop door had shut behind them.

"Look here, Andy," he said. "Is there something else you're keeping back?"

"What you mean, lad?"

"Dad was too old a hand in the bush to be caught by a falling tree."

"Oh, it's true enough. I come by the place and saw it. George Paul will tell you."

"I don't doubt that part of it," Rod said, "but the tree falling. Dad wouldn't have been hit unless someone had ——"

"Listen here, lad," Parr said. "The only thing I've tried to keep from you was about the wolves. I thought it was best. As for the other, I thought of that, too, the first thing. But I was traveling that day and there was a strong wind. Regular April blow and the popple was old and rotten."

"But you were there. You saw the place yourself, didn't you?"

"Yes, passed it on my way down here. But it had snowed and George Paul had been working there, getting Tom out from under. Wasn't a sign of anything like you're thinking. If there was George would have seen it and told me."

"And he didn't say anything?" Rod insisted.

"No. You can talk to him yourself if you want to. But lad! Who'd do a thing like that?"

Rod nodded toward The Spider's post across the bay. Parr laughed.

"Cron's got a bad bark and he snaps at a man's heels and gets some rabbits and other small game. But try that! On Tom Norwood! Lad, you didn't rightly know your dad."

"I did, and I know Cron."

Parr looked at him shrewdly and yet with a slight widening of the eyes.

"All right," he said shortly. "You can talk to George Paul about it."

Rod walked to a window and looked out across the bay. No one was in sight at the other post but smoke rising from the dwelling house roof told that The Spider was there, waiting for the victory that death had given him.

As Rod looked, as he thought of the many things he had heard about this man, he saw that his suspicions had been founded solely upon his fears and his horror of The Spider. Cron had simply hung on, refusing

defeat, until fate, a strong wind and a rotten poplar had rewarded that indomitable will.

Parr, his arms folded across his chest, leaned against the wall and watched the young man. There had been something sweet and gentle in his face when he met the brother and sister. His gray eyes were warm, there was a suggestion of humor and kindliness in the deep sun wrinkles, and his voice, soft and compassionate, had a soothing quality.

Now as he looked at Rod the eyes lost their warmth, his face became stern and there was just a trace of scorn in the lines of his mouth. He waited in silence.

"When did The Spider come back?" Rod asked without turning.

"Last fall."

"Is he getting much fur?"

"He always gets some."

"But dad was holding him?"

"Did you ever know Tom to let Cron get the best of it?" Parr retorted.

Rod did not notice the tone. He was still looking out of the window.

"What is this business worth?" he demanded suddenly.

"Worth!" the old bushman repeated. "Just what it's always been worth, just what the owner *makes* it worth."

Rod flushed.

"That's all a trading post is ever worth," Andy

rushed on. "A few buildings, a few canoes, a stock of trade goods — *they* don't amount to nothing."

"But it's worth something — a long established going concern," Rod retorted hotly. "A good man could take it over and make it pay big. What would it be worth to him?"

"With Cron over there across the bay?" Andy asked scornfully.

Rod knew what he meant. He turned abruptly and walked into the little office at the rear of the trade shop. The rough table and the partioned boxes nailed to the wall behind it, which had served as his father's desk, were littered with papers and ledgers. The very confusion added to Rod's dismay.

"Have you been through these?" he asked, when he heard Andy at his heels. "Do you know how things stand?"

"That was your business," was the curt reply. "I left it for you."

"Didn't dad ever talk things over with you?"

"Some."

"What did he say?"

"I guess you'd better go through the books," Andy told him. "Then you can understand what I say better."

He turned away but wheeled back after the first step. "And you'll understand better, too," he added, "when I tell you my first job was with your grandfather. I grew up with Tom. I knew the Norwoods, the old Norwoods, better'n I ever knew a book.

They didn't have any fancy notions but they was traders and if ——"

"You needn't finish it!" Rod's face was white with anger as he sprang to his feet. "This is my business and I'll take care of it. And I'll tell you right now that Spider or no Spider, I'm going to sell."

"I thought so," Andy said as he turned away.

Immediately after breakfast the next morning Rod hurried to the little office to go through the books. It had been a dreary supper and a long evening and he had slept little. But he had reached a decision, or had strengthened his former determination to live his own life. He would not be shackled by sentiment or chained by the past. His father had not asked it of him nor would he have his memory demand it.

At first Rod could make little of what he found on his father's desk. Tom Norwood had evolved his own bookkeeping system and to its startling innovations he had added a contempt for details and a bewildering carelessness. But certain things were unmistakable, such as a mortgage on the post buildings held by a Toronto bank, unpaid bills from a wholesale house in Toronto and, more startling still, communications from a big Montreal fur company agreeing to large advances on shipments of pelts.

Though stunned at first by these revelations, Rod turned frantically to making rough calculations. He knew two or three days would be necessary to reach

definite figures but a few minutes would give him an approximate valuation.

While he worked he heard Andy Parr enter the trade shop and come to the door of the office. He was standing there, whittling a plug of tobacco, when at last Rod looked up.

"Andy," he demanded hoarsely, "did you know how affairs stand here?"

"From a few things Tom said this winter I guessed they weren't very good."

"Not very good! We're bankrupt, or so close to it we might as well be."

"Bankrupt!" Andy repeated incredulously. "Tom Norwood bankrupt! A man who licks Aaron Cron and every other trader bankrupt! You trying to make me believe two and two makes one?"

His scorn and disbelief, his faith in his old friend, gave Rod an unaccountable feeling of shame and he glanced again at the figures.

"If it's so," Andy rushed on, "I know why. It's the eight years you've been away and all it cost Tom. He told me last winter he'd have to keep humping with two children outside. And starting that new post cost a lot, hitting right into The Spider's own grounds."

There was a little catch in his voice at the end and Rod looked up to see the old woodsman's eyes were wet.

"I know Indians!" he exclaimed. "I know fur. I can trade pelt for pelt with the best of them. But

that's all I can do. I ain't got enough business sense to prime a trade gun. But if I had, if I knew a thing about banks and credit and all such, I'd take hold here and show Tom Norwood's not bankrupt. Son! You're a hell of a son of a Norwood!"

Andy turned abruptly. Rod heard his moccasins padding across the floor but as he started to his feet the outer door was slammed shut.

6

Rod turned back to the littered desk. The confusion was as appalling as the truth he expected to unearth but he attacked it with a determination that he would get at once to a definite knowledge of conditions and learn upon what terms he could close out the business.

Andy Parr's most evident contempt had stung, and Rod recognized the justice of the attack from Andy's viewpoint. But from his own, and from behind the refuge of Jerome Carstens' parting admonitions, any other procedure could be only a futile sacrifice. His father was dead. To remain and pick up the fight where Tom Norwood had left off would be only a vain, fanatical indulgence in useless sentimentality. He would not, he argued, allow his conscience to make a coward of him.

With freshened resolution, Rod began to sort the letters, bills, invoices and notations of loans and indebtedness. He gave little heed to their contents, merely arranging them for a more systematic consideration later. Then he made a hurried examination of the ledgers to learn if they promised definite conclusions as to the state of affairs.

While he was still engaged in this work Andy Parr returned to the trade shop and came to the door of the office.

"I suppose you'll want me to get back to Black Sturgeon?" he said. "Might as well start now while the trail is good."

"I'll want to talk to you later," Rod replied, "after I've straightened things out here. Can you give me a fair idea of how things stand at the other post?"

"'Bout the same as if I had the books here," said Andy grimly.

"All right. I'll try to get through here to-morrow. Then I'll want to talk to you."

Andy turned away without comment and Rod began to read the correspondence. Some of this went back six or eight years. Tom Norwood had not made copies of his own letters but something of them was conveyed by the answers and in these the son also was able to ascertain the dates of the first financial difficulties.

He made notes of some, strove to get at causes and effects, but gradually he became conscious of something else — of personality thrusting itself up through cold business phrases, of warm, human contacts, of respect and faith. Rod knew his father had rarely gone "out" since his marriage, that a bank, a wholesale house and a big fur company could know him only as the owner of a distant fur trading post, and yet the writers of these many letters, though beginning and ending with the set phrases of Canadian commer-

cial usage, were unable to hide manifestations of personal esteem and confidence.

Rod found several canceled notes from the Toronto bank but he discovered that subsequently there had been loans totaling $10,000, none of which had been paid. He found several advances from the Montreal fur company. Some had been taken care of by future shipments but there was still a large sum due. The wholesale house had sent curt, formal notices of overdue accounts but the owner, Samuel Claghom, had written personally letters of gruff admonition, of irritation, but still letters that displayed a sincere interest and a desire to be of service.

From these letters Rod derived two things. The indebtedness was staggering when he reached the total but even as he added the column of figures he was conscious that he was not recording a failure but the triumph of a spirit. He sensed that the great, warm heart of Tom Norwood and his fine, reckless courage had commanded faith and credit from men he had rarely if ever seen.

Rod now turned to the books. They would tell the assets. When balanced against the liabilities, the story would be known. Bankruptcy or a margin so slight it would fade in a forced sale must be the inevitable result.

But much time was required to extract the figures. It was necessary to go over the accounts of seventy-five hunters, learn the amount of "debt," fur already turned in and the approximate total of what could be

expected when the Indians arrived in June with the larger share of the winter catch.

Here again Rod found his father's personality thrusting itself through dry entries. This came first in a startling pension list. A dozen old Indians, men and women, were largely supported by the post.

"Was a boy with my father," Tom had written after one man's name.

"Never traded a pelt with anybody but a Norwood," followed another.

Other names had these notes:

"Froze his feet. Family won't support him."

"Good hunter for forty years."

"Her husband head guide of our first brigade at Lake Deception."

"Saved the old man's life when he went through the ice in Rainy Lake in '56."

Similar notes were made after the names of many of the active hunters. "Best hunter I ever knew." "His father was a Winnebago who came up from Prairie du Chien with us." "Needs a present each fall or he sulks." "Big family and has to have a little help occasionally."

Some of the notations had been made many years before, some were recent. "Always a Norwood Indian" was a common entry and as Rod turned over the pages he began to understand that his father had not jotted them down aimlessly or for his own use. The trader had known every detail of every Indian's life and here in short, pertinent remarks he

was leaving guide posts for his son. They had been continued in the last two years and Rod realized that to the end his father had not given up hope of having a son working beside him.

Even as Rod's cheeks burned with the thought he began to glimpse in the notations, in the entries of blankets, gunpowder, strouds, gilling twine, tobacco and tea, in the listed pelts — beaver, otter, fox, marten, fisher, lynx and mink — something of the romance and color peculiar to the fur trade. "Always a Norwood Indian," came again and again and his mind turned to those early days of struggle and achievement, to the wild, reckless period of battle with the early traders, to the coming of The Spider.

With this thought of Aaron Cron, Rod started in his chair. The Spider had come four times. He remembered them all — when he was six years old, the second time at thirteen, again when he was in college, and now. With these dates before him he again went through the loans, credits, advances and the books. After an hour's work he discovered two things. Each onslaught of The Spider had resulted in a large loss, and the last years there had been another heavy burden, the sums spent by himself and Beth.

In a flash Rod saw it all. Master fur trader though he was, Tom Norwood had never been a business man. He had played the game for the game's sake, as it always had been played, with a glad, reckless, colorful abandon. He had loved struggle, wel-

comed opposition, and in the continued rout of The Spider he had considered himself victorious without counting the cost. He had thrown himself and all the resources of the post into the battle and when Cron had retired Tom Norwood reckoned it victory enough.

He had been true not only to his own impulses and nature but to the precedents of fur land. Born and reared in the old adventurous days of brilliant hazard, when victory lay more in the fighting than in the decision, when the utter rout of a rival left emptiness, he had been unable to see the real menace in Cron's strategy.

Rod remembered how the coming of The Spider had heightened his father's spirits, how eagerly Tom had met the opposition, and he realized suddenly the value and the limitations of that dash and that resourcefulness. Backed by colder and more careful business methods they would have achieved permanent success. Without them they had spilled the life blood of the post in the joy of combat.

For the first time Rod saw something besides a sentimental tribute to a life-long dream in his remaining in the fur trade. He saw that his father, whom he had believed to be invincible, had lacked a sober business sense and caution. His son might have supplied that need and together they might have made the long planned expansion a reality.

Now when it was too late, when that dashing courage and abandon were lost forever, Rod recog-

nized the duty he had failed to see. Because he had lacked his father's zest for battle he had believed the north held no place for him, had insisted upon the priivlege of self-expression in other fields. For the first time since he had faced his father in the trade shop two years before and declared his intention not to be a fur trader, he questioned the justification of desires which had made him so blind to the possibilities of achievement and the demand of duty. His father and his grandfather had ruled a kingdom with judgment and mercy, making a family history which, but for him, might have been enduring in the story of fur land.

As he sat there, his thoughts building a picture of what might have been, as he saw how he, too, might have shared in this power and in the fierce, joyous seizure of it, he heard the outer door open. A moment later Beth, her eyes red, her lips trembling, entered the office.

"Do you have to stay here?" she asked. "It's so dreary in the house. I can't bear it."

Rod was startled. His own problems and his desire to get quickly to the bottom of the financial standing of the post had blinded him to his sister's sorrow. He arose and put his arms tenderly about her trembling shoulders.

"Of course, it's tough," he said gently. "And it's going to be, Beth. I've been busy, so busy I've had time to forget."

"But I can't!" she sobbed. "I can't stay in

that house without him. Isn't there something over here I can do — something to help you?"

Her question carried Rod back to his last summer at the post and how his father had turned away with a jest his offer to help get the books in shape. That had been the Norwood way, shielding the women and dependents from all knowledge of difficulties. Beth had been so sheltered. Her father had always stood between her and life.

"No, dear," Rod answered quickly. "I'm just getting things in shape. You know what dad was as a bookkeeper. It's going to be some job."

"But everything is all right?" she asked in quick alarm.

"All right," he lied stoutly. "You knew dad. Of course everything is all right."

"But if I helped you we could be through sooner," Beth persisted. "And then we could get away. It's so different with dad gone. I can't bear it."

"You think we ought to sell out?" Rod asked.

"It seems dreadful, there's been a Norwood post so long, but we'll have to. You can't give up your writing. Dad didn't ask it then and he wouldn't want you to do it now."

He drew her tight, stroked her hair and tried to stifle her sobs by the pressure of his arms. She was so weak, so helpless, so unfitted for the fate the ledgers had disclosed.

"Beth!" he exclaimed. "I'm going to send you out. There's nothing you can do here except mope

about the house. To-morrow morning I'm starting you for Heathcote."

"You mean to go back to college?"

"Yes. It will be easier than staying here."

"But that will leave you all alone."

"I'm all right. There's plenty to keep me busy."

"And you won't stay — stay long, I mean? You're not thinking of giving up writing? You're going to sell the post?"

"Of course!" Rod answered and the involuntary vehemence convinced Beth of his sincerity. "But closing out isn't a matter of only a few weeks. I'll have to stay through July and get the fur out."

"And then by fall you'll leave?"

"Easily."

"We could go to New York together then and I could keep house for you. Oh, Rod! That would be wonderful."

"We'll do it."

Her smile quickly faded.

"Is it wrong?" she pleaded. "After dad and grandfather? Somehow it seems almost wicked when they worked so long. Yet the other would be worse for you. And even I am deserting. But if I go now I can always have the memory of the post with dad here. If I stay any longer ——"

"It's the only thing to do," Rod interrupted firmly. "Run along and pack. And find Andy. Tell him to get a man and have everything ready for you to start early in the morning."

He turned back to his desk but not to work. Beth and her problem had obtruded upon his own sense of personal disaster. She must be provided for and yet he realized that despite his college course and the two added years in New York, he was still unfitted to earn her living.

Since he had begun work on the accounts and the romance of the Norwood achievements had appealed to his imagination, there had been twinges of regret that he had failed to help his father. But he had assumed that it was too late, that, unleavened by his father's spirit, his own more cautious efforts would be valueless. Duty and obligations to a name had reproached him and now his responsibilities to the living came as a culminating and illuminating factor. For the first time since his return home Rod faced the situation squarely.

Youth and desire rose in passionate revolt. His own dreams beckoned. He longed for New York and its sheltering softness. He wanted to hear Jerome Carstens' logical arguments for the indulgence of his own wishes. But there arose in the tiny office and in the deserted trade shop a figure far more imposing, with an influence far more potent.

Ever since he could remember, his father had stood behind that counter, his booming voice greeting an Indian hunter or shouting a joke to his children as they played outside. Here that great, generous spirit had struggled on with defeat just ahead, alone and uncomplaining. Even the money which had been

so sorely needed to keep a tottering business on its feet had been sent freely, without protest.

And suddenly Rod knew he could not fail that spirit and its memory. He must remain, must take up the Norwood burden where a Norwood had left off. No matter what the outcome, he must make the effort.

Buoyed by an assurance of success, his decision would have been easy. To take up that lonely, heart-breaking struggle in a land which he felt could never be anything but foreign to him required a courage which only love for his father could command.

For a long time he sat staring out of the window at the low, black fringe of spruce across the clearing. After a while a smile lighted his face.

"I've come back, dad," he whispered.

7

The next morning Beth, wrapped snugly on a toboggan, departed for the railroad. Rod stood on the bank of the lake and waved good-bye until the dogs had whisked her from sight around the point on which stood The Spider's post.

And after she had gone he still stood there, staring at the two ugly, squat buildings. For a moment grief overwhelmed him, not only grief for his father but for his own shattered desires. He felt utterly alone, desolate, hopeless, doomed to an existence that seemed unbearably repellant.

All about him lay the wilderness, grim and hideous as it is in spring. The clouds were low, dull and oppressive. The ice on the lakes was blackening and dying. Deeper drifts of snow in the clearing behind the post were wasted and gray like the cheeks of an old man.

The bare skeletons of poplar and birch rattled in a wind more biting than a winter blast. Everywhere, along the shores of the lake, around the buildings, scattered across the clearing, were bare spots of dark, unlovely earth.

In the north summer dies with a burst of glorious

color. It has made a short fight but a brave one since May drove the ice away, laughing at June frosts and August snow flurries and, in the end, swathing itself over night with the crimson and gold of autumn.

But winter, arrogant despot after a long rule, is wholly graceless. It fights desperately, with unexpected displays of violent mood and startling rejuvenation, retreats slowly across a repulsive battlefield and dies at last amid squalor and desolation, bequeathing a memory of pitiless oppression that awes summer and leaves the land dreary and desolate until June dares show its smiling face.

It was in this sullen, dismal mood that the north welcomed Rod Norwood. Its ugliness leered at him. Its loneliness threatened. Its emptiness and its vast distances mocked and defied. For a moment he hesitated, understanding, shuddering, and then he lifted his head in answer to the challenge.

Back in the office, he worked feverishly, anxious to learn how slender was the thread by which he must begin to lift the affairs of the post, and so intent was he that noon came before he had finished. The results, checked over twice, showed that, after all debts were paid, after the spring fur was in, there would be a favorable balance of not more than three thousand dollars.

"Andy," he began as soon as he sat down at the dinner table, "what sort of a showing are you going to make at Black Sturgeon this season?"

The old woodsman glanced up quickly. He had caught a new note in Rod's voice.

"We'll get some fur," he said. "It's Cron's territory, you know."

"Yes, but did you show a profit last year?"

"About a thousand dollars. Better than Tom expected," he said.

"And this year?" Rod persisted.

"I'm hoping to double that. It depends on what happens when the hunters come in."

"Then you're making headway against Cron?"

"Of course. We started from nothing."

Rod asked further questions, the value of the trade goods taken to the new post, what was left on hand and the amount of "debt" issued the previous fall. Parr had the facts ready and a few mental calculations were sufficient for Rod to see how things stood.

"Five thousand!" he exclaimed. "And The Spider being here wipes that out. Andy, can Cron be licked?"

"Can he! Didn't your dad do it three times running?"

"Dad never licked The Spider," Rod answered.

Andy brought his knife and fork, grasped firmly in his two fists, down upon the table with a crash.

"What!" he shouted. "You trying to make me believe Tom Norwood didn't lick The Spider?"

"Believe it or not, I know he didn't," Rod answered evenly. "I've been through the books. The whole story's there. The Spider played a waiting

game. He came, he stayed a year, and left. And each time it cost dad more because he always came when prices had taken a big drop. Dad was a child in business. The Spider must have known it."

The old woodsman's knife and fork were still held upright in his fists and his knuckles were white from the pressure. His body tensed as if for a spring across the table.

"You yellow pup!" he shouted. "Sitting there and talking like that about a man that's done for you like your father done. You, with your college ideas, coming in here and thinking you——"

"Wait!" Rod interrupted. "You're wrong if you think I'm belittling the ability of my father. Like all the Norwoods, he was a fur trader. He won this territory when it took a real trader to do it. There wasn't anything about an Indian he didn't know. And as for being a man, he was one! When I think of how he hung on here, fighting, holding his hunters, never giving up, never even letting me know he was being driven to the wall——"

He choked, shoved back his chair and turned to hide the tears from Andy Parr. The old man watched him. His anger had dissolved in mystification, for to him there was only one kind of loyalty, unquestioning and unswerving.

"The Spider knew him," Rod continued with sudden passion. "He just waited. He knew dad's reckless way of fighting and he was willing to wait twenty years to win.

"Don't you see?" and he faced the older man, "Dad played the game for the game's sake. He got his joy out of fighting for fur. So long as he drove out opposition, kept his hunters, he was satisfied. He didn't know or care what it cost him."

"Tom was restless when he had things easy," Andy agreed.

"That's it. And see what's happened. The Spider's still here. We're practically broke."

"But Tom Norwood never—" Andy began in fresh anger. He broke off when Rod stopped him with a gesture.

"There never would have been a Norwood post if it hadn't been for that very quality in dad and his father," he said. "They went in where no one else dared to go and they won where no one else could. That's the pity of it. All their courage and daring, all their fairness to the Indians, all the color and romance of their lives, had to fall before that hard, grasping beast."

He leaped to his feet, strode to a window and shook his fist at the low, ugly buildings across the bay. "I'll get you yet!" he shouted. "When you leave next time you leave for good."

He whirled back to Andy at the table.

"You've talked a lot since I came," he said harshly. "You've said some things that I've stood for because — well, maybe because they were true. Now you've got a chance to do something besides talk. How about it?"

"You mean you're going to stay?" Andy demanded incredulously.

"I'm going to build this post up to where it was before."

"You'll have to bust The Spider first," and there was a suggestion of a taunt, or of disbelief, in the old fur man's voice.

"The Spider!" Rod repeated. "The Spider once said the Norwood blood had petered out. I'll show him. I'll get him here and I'll get him in the center of his web."

Andy Parr arose and walked around the table.

"Lad," he said slowly, "you're young and you don't know what you're talking about any more'n a rabbit. I've heard your dad talk that way when he was your age and——"

"You don't believe I can do it, eh?" Rod interrupted savagely.

"I know you can because when a Norwood says a thing like that he means it. Now tell me what you want done."

For a moment Rod stared without comprehension. After the biting comments and undisguised contempt of the past two days it seemed incredible. He knew love for Tom Norwood had prompted Andy's feeling but he had never expected to inherit allegiance. He wanted to grasp the older man's hand but he understood the emotional repressions of those who have always lived in the bush.

"Thanks, Andy," he said quietly. "Now here's

where we stand," and he explained briefly in what condition he had found the Norwood affairs.

They talked over plans the remainder of the day. Though Cron's name was often mentioned, there was no more passion. Calmly, but with a growing eagerness on Rod's part, and with a new warmth on Parr's, they outlined possible campaigns. Only once did the young man's anger flare.

"You know," Andy said in a reminiscent tone that Rod came to understand meant a description of past Norwood achievements or a relation of incidents of the old days, both valuably suggestive, "it's a crime the way The Spider treats those hunters of his. He's got 'em so badly scared with all that *windigo* stuff some of 'em don't dare set a rabbit snare without asking him if it's all right. I never knew Indians to knuckle down to a trader the way they do to him."

"And that's what he wants to do to these hunters here!" Rod exclaimed in sudden fury.

"Of course," Andy agreed. "He'd have done it long ago if it hadn't been for your father."

"Then we've got to break his hold over at Black Sturgeon," Rod insisted. "If we can make headway in his own territory we can weaken his attack here."

"Your dad knew how hard that was. That's why he was satisfied with the little fur we've been getting. No, lad. The only way to break The Spider's hold over there is to break The Spider himself."

Rod did not comment. In his new eagerness there had been something impersonal in his attitude toward Aaron Cron, despite heated references to the man and his own peculiar methods. Now, for the first time since he had reached his decision to remain, his early impressions of The Spider returned.

He recalled their first meeting on the banks of Drowning River, when his eyes had been beaten down by that steady stare, the interview across the bay when Cron had offered to conduct the battle for pelts outside the law, and, most clearly of all, his boyhood impressions of what had happened in the old squaw's wigwam and the will and strength that had driven flesh and nerves through such an ordeal.

Rod was unaware that Andy Parr was watching him, or that his own face showed indecision and doubt.

"You've got to break The Spider himself," Andy repeated slowly.

Rod turned his attention to filling a pipe.

"Maybe," he said when it was alight. "Just now we've got to keep him from breaking us here at Lake Deception."

Andy departed in the early spring dawn the next morning and Rod was left alone with Jane, George Paul's wife and housekeeper, and their son Henry, a boy of nineteen who, like his father, had started life as a Norwood employe.

After breakfast Rod went at once to the office to resume his work on the books. He intended to

make a careful examination and determine accurately where things stood, for he had resolved that, first of all, he would avoid his father's error of careless business methods. He had already started Henry to work sorting out goods preparatory to an inventory.

Rod had been at work only a short time when he heard the door of the trade shop open and a man address Henry with one gruffly spoken word — his own name.

"Fellow, he want to talk to you," Henry called indifferently.

Rod went out to find the tall half-breed who always accompanied The Spider. He was standing stiffly in the center of the shop and as Rod appeared he gave the young man a contemptuous glance and then said sharply:

"Cron he want to see you. Right away."

"All right," Rod said. "I'm here."

"Cron he says you come over there," was the peremptory command.

"The Spider's orders don't go at Lake Deception!" Rod exclaimed as he took a quick step forward.

"You better go see him," and there was a little wonder and hesitancy in the half-breed's voice.

"Get out of here!" Rod commanded. "When I want to see The Spider I'll go to his place. You can tell him that."

The man stood irresolutely for a moment and then turned and went out. Rod walked back to his office.

He had been at work less than fifteen minutes when Henry appeared at the door.

"Come see," he said and led the way to a front window.

Rod, impatient because of the interruption, followed, but when he looked out he started in amazement.

"You no go, he come," Henry said with a grin.

Out on the bay Cron's half-breed was dragging his employer on a toboggan. The Spider, gripping the lashing lines with his two hands, swayed precariously as the light sledge, drawn at a lope, swerved and skidded on the smooth ice.

Rod was fascinated. He did not know why Cron was coming. He was not afraid of the man and yet he could not escape the significance of his action. Whatever he wanted, he was intent on getting it. Pride meant nothing to him.

In a moment The Spider disappeared beneath the bank. He had reached the edge of the ice and Rod found himself interested in the method the half-breed would employ to get his master to the top of the bank and across the bare ground to the trade shop.

And then Cron's head suddenly appeared above the edge. It seemed to shoot up, his body following, and the next moment he was moving rapidly across the hundred feet of level ground by a series of shoulder leaps, throwing his arms forward, swinging his heavy body ahead with swift, powerful jerks.

There was nothing piteous or even grotesque in The Spider's means of locomotion. Rather he was

more dismaying than ever. With those quick, springing movements, with such a display of physical force, of energy and masterful purpose, there was something awesome in his squat figure, something that could only impress one with the man's indomitable will.

Rod received the full effect of this. It was the conception he had always had of Cron. He had never been affected by the grim horror of what happened in the wigwam but by the will that lay back of it. To him The Spider had not been quite human. He felt that there was something superlative in such tenacity of purpose, such refusal to accept defeat. Even his father's confidence had never been quite convincing.

For a moment fear came to Rod, not a fear for himself or even a fear of Cron, but a fear of the result. Then the latch was lifted and the door was thrust open.

Cron swung himself into the shop, pushed the door shut with an elbow and stared up at Rod with that steady, searching look he had directed at the boy in their first meeting ten years before.

But he stared only an instant. With a swift, swaying motion he moved across the floor to the counter, placed his huge hands on the edge and lifted his heavy body up and around as easily as if it had been a fifty-pound sack of flour. His eyes were now higher than Rod's.

"Well," he began abruptly, "you've been here long enough to find out how things stand."

Rod did not answer. He was marveling at the man-

ner in which this man's character was expressed in every movement of his body.

"Huh!" Cron snorted. "I'll give you five thousand dollars for the whole thing, debts, mortgage, buildings, trade goods, fur and advances to the hunters. You can walk out to-day with the cash."

Rod was astounded. It was the figure at which he had arrived and he did not believe that anyone except Andy Parr suspected how close the Norwood post was to bankruptcy.

"Hit close, didn't I?" Cron continued harshly. "Pretty decent offer, eh? Your dad wouldn't listen to it. He was a fool. You're not stuck on the bush or the kind of thing you're getting into."

Again Rod marveled at The Spider's divination but the reference to his father had the effect of chilling him — not with fear but with resolution — and in a flash he comprehended exactly what the man was attempting to do.

Cron was seeking to awe and frighten him, to override him with intimidation and a show of force. The very fact that he was so openly threatening aroused a doubt in Rod's mind as to the extent of the power back of it. He sensed bullying and sham and saw the course he would pursue.

"Yes?" he said easily.

Cron's eyes, which had not turned from Rod's face, seemed to leap forward. They had become suddenly angry but Rod was sure he detected a hint of surprise in them.

"Don't be a fool," The Spider snarled. "I offered to buy out your father this winter. The same price. This is your last chance."

He was leaning forward, his head sunk between his heavy shoulders, his great hands gripping the edge of the counter. No one, meeting his eyes, could think of him as being legless.

"If my father turned down your offer I am sure I should," Rod said quietly. After a pause he added: "And for the same reason."

"Same reason! What's that?"

"That you haven't the price."

Cron was not startled. Rod had observed in that memorable interview between the man and Tom Norwood ten years before that he seemed incapable of expressing any emotion or any reaction except to the purely obvious. Now he simply thrust a hand inside his shirt and pulled out a roll of bills.

"The cash," he said.

"Fifty thousand?"

"Five."

"But five's not the price."

"It's all you'll get."

"No, I'm going to get fifty, but not from you. You haven't anywhere near that much. Four trips to Lake Deception, *and back,* cost a lot of money."

"I haven't gone back the fourth time," Cron retorted savagely. "I'm here to stay."

Rod laughed.

"Yes? I remember your saying that same thing

to my father when you came back ten years ago."

"But I'm here now, solid. And where's Tom Norwood?"

The brutal effrontery of the taunt swept aside all Rod's confident self-control.

"You black beast!" he shouted as he took a quick step forward. "Get out! Now! Before I——"

He choked as he glared back into The Spider's steady, searching eyes.

"Huh!" Cron snorted. "What's eatin' you?"

Rod wheeled and walked away. He could not control the hot rage that crept over him as he thought of his father lying on the trail, of dark, gray shadows slinking beneath the spruce, and knew that The Spider sat there and gloated. The man was not even human.

"If you're wise you'll take this money and get out of the bush," Cron said. "It's more than the business is worth but I'll pay it to end things."

"End things!" Rod repeated furiously, and then he realized that he was only letting The Spider bait him.

"I guess we're through, for the present," he said coldly.

"Through! I haven't begun, young fellow. If your memory's so good, perhaps you mind other things said ten years ago."

Rod laughed outright.

"You mean to drop all rules?" he asked easily. "Forget the law? Fight it out alone?"

Cron had not relaxed his searching stare. Now he spat on the floor contemptuously.

"Huh!" he snorted. "You're a bigger fool than Tom Norwood, and," his glance traveled from Rod's face to his feet and back while he paused, "half the man. But if that's what you want, all right. You'll get it."

He leaned forward and seemed to be falling from the counter. But his thick body jerked upright, his arms shot downward and he landed on his hands as another man would have landed on his feet. He started at once toward the door, opened it and swung himself out.

8

The forenoon of the fifth day after The Spider's visit, George Paul returned from the post on Black Sturgeon Lake. The half-breed had been an employe of the Norwoods for forty years and now, though nearly sixty, he was big, thick-chested, broad-backed and as tireless on the trail or in a canoe as when he was young. He had traveled the eighty miles at a dog trot but when he arrived there was no sign of weariness.

Rod welcomed him warmly. George Paul had served the Norwoods so long that not only a sense of loyalty but an intimacy, almost a sense of proprietorship, had been developed. From him Rod had learned all his early woodcraft, all the myths and superstitious fears of the Indians, and even now in his greeting the half-breed assumed the attitude of an indulgent mentor toward a boy.

Because he understood, and because he knew the manner in which George Paul had worshiped his father, Rod did nothing now to affect this relationship. The man had long before proved his faithfulness but beyond his limited duties he was of slight value. It would have been useless to explain the Norwood

financial straits to him, for he could not grasp the situation. To his simple mind, goods appeared, were traded for pelts, and the pelts were sent away. Like Tom Norwood, he was satisfied if the trade of a large district was controlled.

George Paul found Rod in the office and sat down. For a time the conservation was desultory. The half-breed spoke of minor things, the condition of the trail, the fur caught by an Indian whose camp he had passed, the probability of a late spring as deduced from many bits of forest lore. And then, without indication in voice or manner that his thoughts had been elsewhere, he began in a reminiscent tone:

"The wolves kill that other dog. He always damn fool. Never learn anything. But Vic he cute. He smell your father dead, he chew the traces and come home. If he be damn fool, too, the wolves get him. Then there be no Tom Norwood left."

Rod had not dared ask George just what he had found beside the fallen poplar. Now the curiosity of horror gripped him.

"Was it — was it bad?"

"Pretty bad," the half-breed answered casually. "Half hour more me not do much good. Those wolves, there six of them. Big fellows, too. They eat that other dog first."

He turned suddenly and demanded:

"Say, you think it funny Tom Norwood get killed by tree falling down?"

"Funny! What do you mean? You think —— ?"

"Me think Tom Norwood never get caught by windfall. He too old hand in the bush for that. And it not any windfall. It deadfall."

"A deadfall!" and Rod leaped to his feet. "Good God, George! Do you mean someone fixed that poplar?"

"Me no think it, me know it. Don't you ever think it funny Tom Norwood get caught by windfall when he always live in the bush?"

"Yes, I had thought of it. I spoke to Parr but he said it was all nonsense, that he was there five days afterward and it had snowed."

"But me there two days after and it not snow."

Rod stared at the half-breed. He did not doubt George's word or his powers of observation and he knew the man would not speak unless he were sure of what he was saying. The very fact that he had remained silent until now was only further evidence, to one who understood Indian character, of his assurance.

But it was the significance of what George had revealed that aroused Rod.

"Did you track anyone — get any proof?" he demanded.

George laughed.

"That fellow he too cute for that. He not leave any tracks. It snow nearly foot while Tom Norwood at Black Sturgeon. But what difference that make? What you want tracks for? In all Canada there just one man who want to kill your father."

"You mean — ?" and Rod swung his head in the direction of Aaron Cron's post.

"Yes, Ehe-bik, The Spider!" and for the first time George's voice betrayed passion. "Who else? He come here four time now. Tom Norwood he always lick him. Tom Norwood he lick any man buying fur. And Ehe-bik, he get licked once, twice, three time. Then he come four time and Tom Norwood begin licking him again. Ehe-bik he not like that. He always lick other men. He get madder and madder. There only one way for him to lick Tom Norwood. So he do it."

"Can you prove it?" Rod demanded. "Had The Spider left the post the day father was killed?"

"Him leave! Huh! The Spider never do anything. But someone who afraid of him, who get all tangled up in that web Ehe-bik spread through bush. Huh! Ehe-bik just say, 'You do it,' and that man do."

"That wouldn't change The Spider's guilt, I know, but we must have proof. Did you look carefully? Wasn't there anything around the spot, a track, something that had been dropped, any trace of the man who did it?"

George Paul stared at the young man in amazement and then his dark eyes suddenly became aglow with understanding.

"Listen me, Roddy." He began to speak slowly, in the manner of one explaining a simple thing to a simple mind. "Tom Norwood he breaking trail

ahead of dogs. Trail she go close to big rock at edge of swamp up there by Kashabowie Lake and she turn quick around rock and come up the hill.

"That popple she already fall but she catch on point of rock and hang across trail. Me been there this winter and me see it. And when Tom Norwood come along popple slip off and kill him.

"When me go to see what the matter after that dog come home with traces chewed off, me go down little hill to rock and there the tree and there Tom Norwood. Me just stop and look and for long time me never move. Just look. Up on rock. Down on trail. All around on snow. Off in swamp. Both sides trail. Just look because right away me think Tom Norwood he too old hand in the bush to get caught by tree falling that way.

"And me see lot of things. On other side the tree, four, five feet, there dead branch across trail. That all right. Lots of sticks across trail. But this stick she different. At butt end she hook to 'nother stick by branch and that other stick she run along bottom of rock and she hook on another and it stand up again the rock.

"Mind me tell you it snow nearly foot while Tom Norwood at Black Sturgeon? But these sticks they all jerk out of the snow. He step on one, they all move.

"Then me look all around by rock and there three holes in snow, just like something drop in it. After while me feel around by them holes and find three

sticks. They been cut with ax just like piece of deadfall trip, the figger four.

"It pretty cute, all right. No string across trail. Just those three branches hooked together to pull the trigger and let tree fall."

"But there must have been some sort of tracks!" Rod exclaimed.

"Oh, yes. Some. But they no good. That fellow take off his snowshoes while he setting the deadfall. Me see where he walked beside rock. But it snow nearly foot. Those tracks they fill up almost."

"Then there is absolutely nothing that will connect anyone with the murder."

"Nothing!" and George Paul leaped to his feet in sudden fury. "What you want? Tom Norwood he get killed by deadfall set across trail. There just one man want to see Tom Norwood dead. You ask how I know it, when Ehe-bik he sit on his bunk over there across bay and laugh to himself? What you think Tom Norwood do if his father get killed like that?"

Rod did not answer. He returned George Paul's savagely accusing stare without being conscious of it. He knew exactly what his father would have done under similar circumstances. Tom Norwood had been born and had grown up to strong, reckless, hazardous manhood in those wild, free adventurous days when the buying of fur held a bear-baiting zest and the game itself had dwarfed the gain.

He would have laughed at peril, dared defeat for

the joy of combat, would have grinned good naturedly if made a victim of the trickery and cunning which from the beginning have been woven into the ways of fur land. And he would have rushed heedlessly and with a fierce, consuming passion to avenge such a thing as this.

But even as Rod knew how Tom Norwood would act, even as his hero worship rose to new heights, even as blinding rage engulfed him, he understood that his father's ways could not be his. In that moment of stress he paused to wonder if his years in civilization were responsible, if with his creative desires he had inherited from his gentle mother an inability to respond to the primitive urgings of the wilderness. On mere suspicion he could not exact vengeance.

"What you think Tom Norwood do?" George Paul repeated. "You think he ask question? You think he sit still?"

Rod knew the fierce loyalty that prompted the question, understood exactly how George would meet the situation, and for a moment he envied the man that capacity for heedless passion which could sweep him so quickly and so gloriously to his goal.

But George misunderstood his silence. In his savage mind revenge could be obtained in only one way.

"You no do it, me do!" he cried. "That Ehe-bik he like wolf, like *windigo*. He worse than any devil that ever live in the bush. He sit over there now, just little way, and laugh because Tom Norwood dead.

He laugh because the wolves eat Tom Norwood. He laugh because he think nobody know, because he think everybody else is big fool."

George's brown face suddenly became horrible, as fury contorted his features and flashed in blinding light far back in his black eyes.

"But he laugh no more!" he shouted. "To-night me get him."

Rod leaped to his feet.

"None of that!" he commanded sternly. "Understand? Leave this to me."

"But you——"

"I said to leave it to me."

"You go over there?" George asked eagerly. "Take gun. That Ehe-bik, he like bear. Don't go near him. Don't let him get hands on you."

Rod hesitated. He had no doubt but that George Paul was right, but that Aaron Cron had murdered his father, and for a moment something of the half-breed's passion was communicated to him. He felt a mad desire to rush across the bay, to confront The Spider with his crime and exact primitive, personal justice. It would be so easy, in an orgy of violence, to wipe out the man who stood between him and everything he wished in life. Just an assumption of The Spider's guilt — grief and anguish lashed to an unthinking state — and all would be over.

His father would be avenged, the Norwood post would be made of value, financial rehabilitation practically assured. The law was far away, an investiga-

tion improbable, but — and the thought instantly removed the possibility of such a course — the death of The Spider would be of inestimable value to Rod himself — would solve his problem.

His face hardened as he realized how far the temptation had carried him. Even though a single moment might lift him past the mental barrier that stretched between him and the fur land way, he would never be able to justify that vengeance as impersonal.

Rod walked to a window, looked at the two buildings on the next point and then whirled back to George.

"Where did this happen?" he demanded sharply.

"Why?" was the sulky answer.

"Where was it?" Rod insisted impatiently. "Kashabowie Lake?"

"Yes, other side. Winter trail she leave lake mile before you get to Rat Root River. She go over little ridge and down into swamp. There she cross another trail. Hunter's, I guess. Then she go over low ridge and down another swamp and there the place."

"It snowed while dad was at Black Sturgeon," Rod said. "Andy told me he got there Sunday and left Friday morning. Who was over at The Spider's that week?"

"Jim, that tall one who always with him, Jim's woman, Ellen, and another one Ehe-bik bring from Mattawa this time. Bapinini, they call him, 'The

Laughing Man,' but he never laugh. He just look like it. Get cut with knife one time I guess."

"Were they gone while it snowed, and just before?"

"Me see them Sunday, Monday no see 'em," George answered. "Tuesday night Sha-baw-nah-quay-shkon come with little fur. He say he see them Monday on Kinewan Lake."

"Kinewan," Rod repeated. "That's thirty miles west. Kashabowie is northwest. They're less than thirty miles apart."

"Yes," George said with sudden interest. "That just give them time to get to Kashabowie after it start snow. Then they set deadfall. Lot of snow cover trail."

"There was a little snow after you found dad?" Rod asked.

"Maybe three inches Monday night when me get to Black Sturgeon. That last time it snow."

Rod was silent for a moment, going over the facts he had gathered. He realized that the heavy snowfall after the setting of the deadfall, and the light one following his father's death, made his task extremely difficult, if not impossible. And yet there was a chance, a chance he must not overlook if he were to fix this crime on Aaron Cron.

"George!" he exclaimed suddenly, "Fix me up an outfit, grub for eight or nine days. And keep quiet about it."

The half-breed had known Rod since infancy and

had never quite been able to forget those early, protective days.

"Where you go?" he demanded.

"Kashabowie. But that's between us. Don't tell Jane, Henry, anyone."

"But Ehe-bik, he know."

"I won't start until after dark. And say I've gone to Toronto. Say something about a bank. Then The Spider will believe it. And remember! No word about dad. Don't tell anyone. Cron must never suspect that I know."

Dragging a small toboggan which slipped easily over the ice, Rod left the post that night. Once out of hearing, he started at a dog trot and he did not stop, except for meals, until the next noon, when he reached the north shore of Kashabowie Lake.

There had been no need for secrecy after Lake Deception lay behind him. Winter was dying, valiantly but surely. Trails were rotting. Each day the sun mounted higher, remained aloft longer. Traders waited at home, the season's work finished. Hunters lay in their wigwams. Fur bearing animals began to rub loosening hair from backs and sides. Rod had the limitless forest to himself. He had no fear that his errand would become known.

There was no difficulty in finding the spot where the winter trail left the lake. He entered the swamp, saw the old snowshoe path running at right angles to his own course — the one George Paul had said

was probably an Indian hunter's — and went on up the low ridge. On the other side, he knew, was the place.

Yet he came upon it unexpectedly. The trail turned suddenly to the left, dipped, and Rod found himself beside the rock from which the poplar had fallen and facing the prostrate tree itself. As had George Paul, he halted and looked, but with different emotions.

So intent had he been on reaching this spot, so anxious to discover some bit of evidence that would help to fasten the crime on The Spider, the real significance of the place had escaped him. Now as he stared at the fallen tree, at the dismal, eerie swamp stretching before him, the trunks and branches of the spruce hung with spectral moss, at the wasting snow, graying and spotted and bedraggled, the grim horror of what had happened there became overwhelming.

Beyond the poplar, the trail stretched into the swamp, and he could imagine his father coming toward him, thrusting out his snowshoes with quick, powerful movements that failed to disclose the long day's toil. He could see him, tall, broad, strong, still a man of lean waist and springing muscles though fifty years old. He could see his smile through the beard, could hear his encouraging shout to the dogs, could feel again the tingling effect of that vivid, joyous, great-hearted personality.

And then Rod saw him lying close to the fallen

poplar, suddenly struck down — his whole glorious, colorful life crushed out. He could see the dogs, cringing and whining in fear, sniffing and then bursting into the mournful death howl.

He could hear the distant, terrifying call of the pack, could see the gray shadows flitting beneath the moss-shrouded spruce, could picture the long vigil, the growing courage, the sudden, snarling, snapping rush of the great brutes, the still, unresisting body.

For the first time since he had received the telegram in New York, Rod broke down. He stumbled forward, dropped to his knees beside the prostrate tree and buried his face in his arms. There in the very presence of death, with the whole scene flashing so vividly through his mind, the tragedy of it overwhelmed him.

In that moment of grief it was death and not the cause of it, Tom Norwood and not The Spider, that occupied Rod's thoughts to the exclusion of all else.

9

Rod left the place where his father had been killed without being able to add in any way to the facts George Paul had given him. He satisfied himself that a deadfall had been set, that his father had been murdered, but though he searched thoroughly, he was unable to find the least clue to the identity of the slayer.

He did find dim traces of where a man had come to the spot without snowshoes from the trail which George Paul had believed to be an Indian hunter's.

Rod knew the man must have camped somewhere near and followed this trail westward. After two hundred yards he found a branch leading off to the right, almost straight toward the spot where his father had been killed.

As he hesitated a significant fact impressed itself. The trail he was following, the slayer's, had been made at the beginning of the big snowfall. The branch and the trail beyond had been made afterward.

Puzzled, Rod dropped his toboggan traces and started along this deeply trodden path. Another

light snow and successive thaws had obliterated many signs, yet it could easily be seen that one man alone on snowshoes had walked up that trail and back again.

The deep trench wound through the swamp to the low ridge, led up to the crest and ended. A place had been trampled down, as if someone had stood there and then turned in his tracks. More puzzled than ever, Rod glanced around. He could not understand why the man had come to this place, why he had stopped and retraced his steps.

And then he looked down the bare side of the ridge to the swamp below and saw, a hundred yards away, the winter trail turning around the big rock and across it the fallen poplar.

At the scene of his father's death Rod had given way to his grief, had stood helpless and hopeless before the vision of this tragedy of the wilderness. At home he had envied George Paul that fierce, unreasoning fury and its demand for instant retribution.

Now Rod himself looked through the eyes of a savage, felt the urge of primitive lust. Even the definite knowledge that his father had been murdered had failed to arouse him as did the thought of the slayer standing where he now stood, looking down into the swamp, seeing the victim of his diabolical trap, then turning away, perhaps with a grin, at the sound of the gathering wolf pack.

To Rod this last act was more fiendish, more hor-

rible, than the murder itself. It stirred him as nothing else ever had. He was unconscious that he spoke and yet a steady stream of low, passionless curses poured from his lips. The hillside and the dark swamp faded and he saw only the end — the moment when The Spider should pay.

Still blind with this passion, he returned to the trail in the swamp. Thence, with his toboggan traces again about his shoulders, he went on westward in the path his father's slayer had made.

After a mile he came to a place where two men and a dog team had camped, evidently for several days. He searched the spot thoroughly, even shaking out the balsam branches of the thick bough bed, but in the end he was forced to admit that there was nothing, not even a piece of equipment lost in the snow, that would give any clue to the identity of those who had been there.

He went on westward, following the trail by which the men had gone. It turned south and he broke into a shuffling dog trot, pressing ahead as fiercely as if the tracks were fresh instead of a month old, but before dark he was forced to give up. A hunter moving his family to be near a moose he had killed, an Indian following a small band of caribou, a tripper with dogs and trade outfit, all these had used and crossed and branched off the path he was following.

Rod turned back toward the northwest and traveled until dark. Early the next morning he was on

his way again and late in the afternoon he reached the Norwood post on Black Sturgeon Lake.

Beyond a quiet "Bo' jou'," Andy Parr said nothing upon his employer's unexpected appearance. Rod had traveled far and hard and his face showed the effects of physical strain. But his eyes were bright and unwearied and his lips had lost their curve.

The old trader saw at once that something had happened, yet he was impressed most by the knowledge that this was not the young man he had left at Lake Deception little more than a week before.

"I've been over at Kashabowie," Rod began at once, when a glance told him that they were alone in the little log trade shop. "I found out that dad was murdered. Someone fixed that poplar and then waited to make sure."

"But I was there!" Andy protested incredulously. "I didn't see any——"

"No, you couldn't. It had snowed a few inches and George Paul had been tramping around the place. But he saw the signs, branches set across the trail to pull the trip, three pieces of green birch cut for the figure-four. You never suspected such a thing. George Paul did. As soon as he got back he told me and I went up."

"Why didn't George tell me?" the trader demanded.

"He knew it was my job," Rod answered curtly.

"But I've got a share in it. I had my first job with your granddad and Tom and I were——"

He took a quick step forward and grasped Rod's shoulder.

"I'm starting for Lake Deception to-night!" he exclaimed furiously. "Legs or no legs, if that trap was set it was The Spider that done it. And when I get through with him, the——"

All the vituperative ability of one who has always blazed his own thought trails, who has scorned the theft of phrase as he would the theft of food or a canoe, all the startlingly original, searching, searing expressions peculiar to those who have lived much alone in far, silent places, flowed from Andy's lips.

Rod, as when he had watched blind, primitive passion sweep George Paul's mind clear of all but revenge, envied the man that hot, savage lust for another's blood. He knew Tom Norwood would have been like these two. For a moment he wondered if there were something lacking in himself, if with a city mother and the long years of city life he had grown to manhood without that tameless spark which glowed in others, if in striving to realize youthful dreams he had killed something more desirable.

"And now for a month he's been laughing at us!" Andy shouted. "If that fool George Paul hadn't waited——"

"He waited because he knew it was my job," Rod interrupted.

"Then what you doing here? Why didn't you go back?"

"Because I can't do it your way."

"Can't! You don't mean, lad, that you're ——" Andy stopped, unable to phrase the accusation.

"No, not in the way you mean. Afraid of myself. Have you stopped to think how much I'd gain if I killed The Spider?"

"That needn't count when you know it was Cron ——"

"But it does," Rod interrupted. "I'm as sure he did it as I am you're standing there. I found the three pieces of the figure-four trap and the trail where a man walked down there before the snowstorm. I saw the trail leading up to the crest of the ridge where he waited to make sure that dad was dead and then walked off and left him to the wolves."

He stopped for a moment, remembering his emotions as he stood at that spot, and when he continued his voice was husky.

"I found the spot where two men and a dog team camped for three days. I know Jim and that other half-breed, 'The Laughing Man,' left Lake Deception a few days before. They were seen on Lake Kinewan, thirty miles away.

"But I can't prove it. I couldn't find a thing to identify them. I couldn't track them back after a month. There isn't a court in the country that ——"

"Court!" Andy cried contemptuously. "What do you care about a court? What kind of proof

do you want when there's only one man who'd ——"

"The same man whose death would solve my financial troubles," Rod finished. "Don't you see? I must have proof."

"How are you going to get it?" Andy demanded. "Do you think those men are going to talk?"

"They will when I'm finished with The Spider."

Rod leaned forward, tense, his hands clenched as if he were about to spring.

"I'm going to break him!" he shouted hoarsely. "I'm going to break him so completely his own men will turn against him. And then I'm going to see him hanged."

Andy Parr had been too intent on his own method to catch a hint of Rod's purpose or of his sudden passion.

"But lad," he protested. "There's an easier way and a quicker."

"And more cowardly!" Rod retorted savagely. "I don't want it easy and I don't want it quick. I'm going to break him. I'm going to get him where I don't even need his death to carry on the Norwood post. I'm going to break his hold on those two half-breeds and then I'm going to make them talk.

"Don't you see, Andy? I'm going to smash him, smash his spirit, strip him of everything. I'm going to whittle him down until there's nothing left but his black heart. And then I'm going to see him hanged."

At last Andy Parr had caught the fire and the fierce desire back of the words. He stared for a moment and then his eyes lighted.

"You were rightly named, lad," he said softly.

"Named! What do you mean?"

"You never saw your grandfather, old Roderick Norwood. He ran away and lived with the Indians for ten years, right around Lake Deception there. He and Tom were different and now ——"

"Never mind that!" Rod interrupted impatiently. "I've got to hurry. I've got to hit Cron hard — this spring — right here. This post must make such a big showing he'll be pulled away from Lake Deception. We're going to quit defending ourselves. We're going to attack. We're going to pound him hard, right in his own territory."

He broke off, choking, unable to get the words out fast enough, and then suddenly he lifted both fists.

"Don't you see?" he cried. "I can't go and kill him in cold blood when I haven't absolute proof. I can't kill a cripple. But I can smash this web he's woven through the bush. I can get those two half-breeds out from his power and when I do I'll make them confess.

"And then! Don't you see? He'll be crushed, broken! The law will come in — the law he thought was too far away. He'll be tried. He'll see he's losing. He'll be convicted. He'll lie in jail for months before they take him out and hang him. Isn't that better than shooting?"

"It sounds so, lad, but you said yourself that even your dad never licked The Spider."

"But I can. I'm going to. Now listen. Only you and George Paul and I know about this. The Spider and those two half-breeds won't suspect we know and they must never suspect it. We'll go on as if we never thought of such a thing. Now here at Black Sturgeon——"

"Wait a minute. I'm not much on the business end of it but when I left Lake Deception last week you were talking about debts and being near bankrupt. How are you going to start a fight like this without money?"

"I won't need it if I can get the bank, the wholesale house and the fur company to give us a chance. They've got to. I'm going to write to them to-night and take the letters out before I go home."

"You'd better not let them know you're going after The Spider so strong," Andy advised. "They might think it was too big a risk. And you're young and they don't know you like they did your dad."

Rod hesitated a moment. He saw that the trader was right, saw the possibility of failure in this direction, of being robbed even of the opportunity to fight.

"Get me some paper and a pen," he said as he walked around the counter to a desk behind it.

He began to write at once, without pausing to phrase his thoughts adroitly. First, he told briefly of his father's death, due to an accident, he said, and

of the condition in which he had found his affairs. He did not ask for favors or for a sentimental leniency toward the Norwood company but when he wrote of his intention to place the two posts on a paying basis and clear up the debts something of his attitude toward The Spider crept into the letters. Unconsciously he imparted a spirit of confidence, gave the impression of an indomitable will.

Early the next morning Rod was on his way southward to the railroad, along a route Andy had outlined. He reached steel at a station west of Heathcote, arriving there on a freight train.

As he was going to bed in the little log hotel that night he remembered Jerome Carstens. For a moment a sense of loss overwhelmed him, as he thought of what he must give up but as he sat down to write those dreams faded. The Spider crowded them out. The vision of the time when he had conquered this man, when he had crushed and beaten him and had attained his revenge, came to the front.

As a consequence, his letter to Carstens was short. He merely stated that his return was indefinite, two years in the future at least, and asked that his books and belongings be shipped to him.

Once back at Lake Deception, Rod plunged into the work of organizing his campaign with such energy that George Paul was a bit bewildered. Several times the half-breed opened the subject of Rod's journey to Kashabowie but without result.

"Wait," was all Rod would tell him, and each day he drove his employe to a series of tasks which George, accustomed through a lifetime to Tom Norwood's joviality and easy-going manner, found irksome. Never had George Paul worked so hard, but always the somber-eyed, tight-lipped youth was working harder.

In the first days in May the ice in Lake Deception broke up and Rod immediately started George Paul and an Indian to Heathcote for the mail. They returned six days later and the young man grasped the little bag of magazines and letters before the canoe had been beached and hurried away to the office in the rear of the trade shop.

His fingers trembled as he sorted out the envelopes. In the three weeks since he had returned to the post doubts had come. He knew he was young and untried and many rereadings of letters in the files had failed to give him hope that faraway, careful business men would trust him to go on with the work in which his father had come close to failure.

Because he dreaded most the attitude of the bank he opened its communication first. A great sigh of relief came to his lips as he read.

"We will be glad to extend the notes," it said. "After handling the Norwood account for so many years we cannot change our policy because a new Norwood has assumed control. We would like to have a complete statement of your financial stand-

ing, not that we doubt our security but that we may feel justified in helping your further."

The big fur company in Montreal was equally trustful and hinted at a possibility of "being of unexpected assistance in a short time."

"Your father and your grandfather have been doing business with us for too many years to fail you now," the letter concluded.

The communication from Samuel Claghom, the Toronto wholesaler who supplied the post with trade goods, was of a wholly different tone and yet more gratifying in its trust.

"Send in your order this spring and the goods will be forwarded to you," he continued after a short paragraph of roughly stated sympathy, which Rod found more sincere than the polite phrases of the banker's missive. "Roderick Norwood gave me my first big order when I started in business and I've had the Norwood account ever since. The grandson will have to do a lot to make me forget that.

"And let me tell you something, young fellow. Be half as good a fur buyer and twice the business man your father was and you'll succeed. The first will be hard, the second easy. Tom Norwood was uncanny with the natives and a child in business. He was too careless, played one end and let the other go. He counted pelts but never pennies. He'd tramp a hundred miles in bitter weather to buy an Indian's fur and a hundred miles back but he'd never spend a few hours a month finding out just where he stood.

"Now about this senseless fight with Cron. Just because your father got a lot of fun out of it, and came so close to a smash, do you have to keep it up? Can't you two get together somehow? There's no use in cutting each other's throats. If Tom had lived another year they would have both been bankrupt. Tell Cron to let well enough alone and go back to his other post."

Rod laid the letters aside with conflicting emotions. His eyes were moist because of the faith and the trust of these strangers in the mere name of Norwood but most of all he experienced a feeling of elation, a suffocating rapture, in the thought that he was now armed for the struggle, that he could go on with his campaign against Aaron Cron, that he would be permitted to launch an attack that in the end would result in vengeance.

He thrust the letters aside and rose to his feet, eager and more confident than ever, but as he turned away from the desk he saw another missive. The handwriting on the envelope told that it was from Jerome Carstens.

As when at Heathcote he had written to his friend, Rod's former dreams rose to take position of him. He knew, with credit assured, that he was embarked on a long struggle, that New York and all he had hoped for were thrust far into the future. With youth's impatience and lack of perspective, he even believed that there was no hope of his ever returning to the work that had seemed life itself.

It was with something of self-pity that he tore open the envelope.

Carstens had let himself go. Scorn and denunciation were thinly veiled at first by a formal expression of sympathy but even this restraint was soon cast aside.

"Are you mad?" he wrote. "Have you lost all sense of proportion? Does art mean so little to you that it can be jilted in such shameless fashion? Don't you know you have a duty, an obligation? Do you disregard the fact that you owe fealty to something with which you are endowed and which you have not the moral right to stifle?

"Look at it sanely. With all due respect to your estimable father, can't you see that you are accomplishing nothing by retreating into the wilderness and devoting yourself to an obscure business, to tangless, bootless barter with disgusting savages? Look at it honestly. Isn't it only mawkish sentimentality, a criminal sacrifice of talent and opportunity on the altar of simpering affectation, a muddled attempt to cling to moth-eaten habits of thought that may satisfy witless fools but should appear in their utterly deceitful colors to one whose talents entitle him to a place in the world of creative achievement?

"Don't be a puling ass. Be yourself. Sell those log shacks, the tin hatchets and beads and looking glasses. Forget them. Forget you ever knew them. Come back to New York at once."

As he read, Rod's body stiffened, his eyes became

hard, his mouth straightened in an ugly line. And before he reached the end he suddenly clutched the letter in his fist, crumpled it into a hard ball and hurled it across the room. In that moment he knew that he was through with Carstens forever. He found himself wondering how he had ever looked on this man as friend.

10

In the middle of June Andy Parr arrived from Black Sturgeon. Rod had seen him far out on the lake and a telescope had made it possible to learn the news long before the heavily loaded freight canoes touched the Norwood dock.

The two gripped hands silently as the old trader stepped ashore but, beyond a few commonplaces, they did not speak until they were alone in the seclusion of the dining room.

"You old fox!" Rod cried jubilantly. "What did you do? Rob the hunters of their fur?"

Andy grinned as he pulled knife and plug from a pocket but there was an anxious note in his voice when he asked, "How did you come out, lad?"

"Almost a clean sweep. Cron's dead here. But don't be a clam. How did you do it?"

"It wasn't me. First of all, Tom Norwood knew what he was doing when he picked that place on Black Sturgeon. A third of The Spider's hunters pass it on their way to his post at Mattawa."

"And you spun a little web of your own, eh?"

"Sort o'. But the thing that won was your sending that message through so quick. I could pay 'em

a price for fur The Spider never had. That and the load of old trade goods you sent in to be given away. Where'd you get it?"

"That was one of dad's mistakes, one of the things he overlooked," Rod answered. "He didn't mend a leak in the warehouse until quite a bit of flour got wet. Some pork got mouldy, too. There was a lot of stuff that was partly spoiled in one way or another, blankets and strouds and plaids."

"Goods no Indian would take for fur but stuff that he would be tickled to get as a gift, eh?" Andy nodded in understanding.

"Of course. I went through everything, made an inventory, sorted out the damaged stuff. I kept George Paul and Henry busy for a week and now we're down to a clean start. A lot of things dad would have thrown away pleased some of The Spider's hunters and there was no loss. But how did you get them to sell so much to you?"

"Well, they all stopped on their way to Mattawa," Andy said. "I handed out pork and flour and a few of those stained blankets to the first ones and they hung on hoping for more. Pretty soon there was twenty wigwams around the place but a back cradle would have held all the fur I got from the whole crowd.

"All the time I was playing missionary, trying to make 'em see The Spider wasn't any *windigo* but just a plain, mean white man. I didn't get far with that. Why, lad, those Mattawa bow-and-arrows is

so scared of Cron they won't even listen when you try to tell 'em different.

"But there's one thing. They're Indians just the same, and when that message of yours come through telling me what I could pay, they fell all over themselves passing the pelts over the counter."

"That was luck, and a friendly tip from the fur company in getting the word from Montreal that prices had advanced," Rod said.

"But it wasn't luck the way you used it," Andy retorted warmly. "Henry and that Indian paddled thirty hours straight and they wasn't a minute too soon. But fur hasn't gone up that much, has it?"

"There was a mean advance of fifteen per cent. I paid ten per cent higher prices here. Had to protect our own Indians — give them some of the advantage — but I figured that with the smaller number at Black Sturgeon you could pay twenty-five per cent more and just about offset what I saved here."

"But Cron must have got the news, too."

"He did, only it was too late. The word went through to Mattawa and was relayed here. The messenger was slow and it gave us five extra days. When I started raising prices The Spider thought it was only a bait at the beginning of the spring trading and didn't meet it. When I kept on he thought I was losing all my profit."

"Figured he was letting you hang yourself," the old trader chuckled.

"Yes, and then when all the sixty hunters had

traded — he got the fur of just three of them — his message came through. But Andy! Did you get all the fur of those men who stopped at Black Sturgeon?"

"From a few. They couldn't stand prosperity. That extra money must have killed their fear of Cron. The rest, they gave up all they dared and went on to Mattawa with what was left. The thing for us to do now is to hold those hunters we've weaned away. But I'm afraid we've started so strong The Spider will build an outpost at Black Sturgeon this summer."

"Let him!" Rod exclaimed, and for the first time his exuberance vanished and there was a savage light in his eyes. "We've got him on the run, Andy. We're going to beat him. He's lost a lot of money. He'll have to pull out of Lake Deception again."

"And then?"

"We're going into Mattawa. That's where we've got to whip him. We'll build a post right beside his and we'll show those Indians he's not a *windigo*."

"Lad," Andy said huskily, "you do that and Tom Norwood will sit up in his grave and let out a whoop they'll hear in Montreal."

Rod did not seem to hear. He had sprung from his chair and was pacing back and forth.

"You're not thinking of going into Mattawa this summer?" the old trader asked at last.

"That would be foolish," Rod answered curtly. "What we've got to do for a while is hold the ad-

vantage we've gained. It may be that out of pure cussedness The Spider will hang on here another year."

"What can he do? He can't get these Indians."

"No, they're pretty well aware of the sort he is and of what has happened at Mattawa. I've talked to them a lot this summer and they're pretty solid."

"Picked up your Ojibwa again, eh?"

"That came easy," Rod laughed. "You ought to hear me. But licking The Spider here isn't enough. He's not licked yet and after what happened last spring we can't be too careful."

"He won't dare do anything more like that," Andy objected.

"Did dad ever tell you about the talk he had with Cron the second time he came, when I was a kid? Dad didn't pay much attention to it — believed it was a bluff. But The Spider dared him to drop all rules then and fight it through outside the law."

"He did, eh? And Tom took him up?"

"And was murdered. He didn't take it seriously. I heard The Spider then. It scared me. Dad only laughed. Said he wouldn't dare."

"And now, after what he's done — " Andy began.

"Wait. After you left here last spring The Spider sent for me. I wouldn't go to him, so he came over here. Among other things, like offering to buy me out for five thousand and saying he was going to stick this time, he asked if I remembered the agreement he and dad made. I told him it suited me and

he left with the remark that I would get what I wanted."

"Then you think Cron's liable to break loose with any sort of dirty trick?"

"He's sure to, now that he's beaten here and we've cut into him at Black Sturgeon."

Andy looked through the window at The Spider's post across the bay.

"The only thing to do in a case like that is to beat him to it," he remarked.

"No," Rod answered decisively. "We'll only keep our eyes open. If he starts anything, then we'll play that game, too."

"But he's asked for it. And hittin' first is always half a fight."

"I don't have to and I won't until I do. This is going my way, Andy."

"Well," the older man said slowly, "I won't argue that with you. Your way's been pretty fair so far."

That night Rod went over the Black Sturgeon reports and reached a close approximation of how the winter had ended. He could not know definitely until the fur had been purchased by the Montreal company, but he was certain of a big profit on the takings of the two posts.

"I'll clear up half the debts this year!" he exclaimed jubilantly. "We're going to lick him, Andy!"

"It's a great game, buying fur," the old trader commented.

Rod whirled to look at him and caught an amused twinkle in his eyes.

"It is," he agreed. "More fun than I ever thought it could be."

"Feeling better about staying here, aren't you?"

"Better! What do you mean?"

"Mind last spring when you first come? You was all for selling out and getting back to New York."

"I had to stay," Rod answered. "There was nothing else to do. And now!"

Andy said nothing further. He knew Rod was thinking of his father and yet the twinkle remained in his eyes.

Rod pushed the books across the desk and arose to his feet.

"I'm going to hurry out the brigade," he began briskly. "I'll take it myself and you stay here until I came back. The fellow at Black Sturgeon is safe enough, isn't he?"

"I'd trust him. He's worked with me before. Half-breed but better'n most. On top of that, I painted a good, healthy fear of Cron and his ways. He won't let nothing funny happen there."

"Then you keep your eye peeled here, Andy. The Spider is liable to do anything, now that he's being licked. I wouldn't be surprised if he tried to burn the post."

"Not while I'm on the job. You get the brigade out. How many canoes'll it take?"

"Six," said Rod, with a smile of satisfaction.

"Wah! And is your next winter's outfit at Heathcote?"

"Yes, and I ordered twenty-five per cent more than usual."

"For Black Sturgeon, eh?"

The old fellow's eyes brightened as he asked it. Even after Rod's visit to Black Sturgeon, doubts had come. He wondered if youth and enthusiasm could prevail against Aaron Cron, if the passionate zeal of his new employer were only a flash.

"Yes, for Black Sturgeon," Rod answered. "And there's a percentage on the new business for you from now on."

"Percentage of hell!" Andy burst forth. "I never had anything but wages and I don't intend to start changing now."

Rod looked at him a moment. He knew what was back of the apparent anger and he knew, too, that in the old trader's fierce loyalty to Tom Norwood he had a valuable asset.

"That's a matter for me to decide," he said curtly.

"You're getting mighty fresh deciding everything around here," Andy retorted. "Pretty soon you'll have me wearing a uniform. I was buying fur before you was born."

"The percentage goes from now on," Rod declared. "I've got to have some way of keeping tabs on you. Now how about your canoemen? They're Cron Indians. Can you keep them away from him?"

"I can but it's best to get them out quick. When you be ready to start?"

"To-morrow noon. I'll rush things."

"You've got as good a chance of doing that as of giving me a percentage," Andy snorted. "It'll take your Indians two days to make up their minds to go."

"Watch me," Rod answered, and the next noon, to the old trader's amazement, sixteen Lake Deception Indians in addition to his own eight from Black Sturgeon pushed six huge freight canoes from the Norwood dock and the annual summer brigade had started.

"I'd quit smoking if Tom could 'a seen that," Andy said to George Paul as they stood at the top of the bank.

"But The Spider, he sit over there yet," the half-breed growled.

"Don't make any mistake about the lad," was the curt rejoinder.

"He no do something pretty quick, me do it," George continued fiercely, as if he had not heard.

Andy was about to issue a stern command when he saw the man's face and understood that here was a loyalty and a hatred equal to his own. He put his head on George's shoulder.

"That's how I felt about it at first," he said kindly. "Now I don't worry about it any more. The boy's waking up every day. You remember old Roderick."

George gave the Indian grunt of assent.

"Well, this lad isn't Tom but he's a Norwood just the same. Keep your hands off."

Out on the lake, headed southward, Rod was seated comfortably in one of the big canoes, writing letters. Because of his hurried departure he had been unable to attend to his correspondence but now several days of inactivity stretched before him.

The first four letters were short. Three, addressed to the bank, the Montreal fur company and to Samuel Claghom, the Toronto wholesaler, were strictly business communications. The fourth was still shorter and contained the brief statement that he did not know when he would return to New York, if ever. It was addressed to Jerome Carstens.

The fifth was to Beth, and it enclosed a generous check.

"I'm sorry I couldn't send it when you asked for it," he wrote, "but at the time I didn't see how I could raise the money. Things have brightened here wonderfully, however. There was nothing serious. Dad had expanded a little too fast and tied up some capital and I did not dare draw out the money you wanted for the visit to Montreal this summer.

"Now, with the fur in, we are in wonderful shape. The new post is booming, we got everything at home, and we are on Easy Street. It looks as if I would be able to clear out soon.

"Hope the enclosed check gets to you in time to start east with your friends. It will do you good

to get away and of course there is nothing for you here. I will be gone much of the summer and it would be unbearable for you at the house."

There was more, a studied effort to cheer her up, to cover the real situation at Lake Deception, and Rod was well satisfied with his letter.

He found, too, as twenty-four flashing paddles drove the big canoes southward, as excited, laughing Indians raced across portages with their heavy burdens, as the glorious June days passed in brilliant succession, that other things brought satisfaction. He knew he was winning, that the campaign he had inaugurated was progressing auspiciously, and as he watched the toiling canoemen, looked over the six heavily loaded craft, he was buoyed by a sense of accomplishment.

It was not alone a feeling that he was nearing the chief goal he had set, that he was hastening The Spider's end. Though he did not recognize it, something of the spirit that had sent three former Norwoods into far places, that had driven them to bold achievement, now possessed him. Those Indians were subject to his bidding. That fur had been gathered as a result of his own effort and aggressiveness. He was a feudal baron in fur land.

Thus it was a confident, brisk, energetic young man who finally saw his six canoes drawn up at the river bank at Heathcote and who sprang ashore with orders that the precious bales were to be carried at once to the station. He himself hurried ahead to

make the arrangements with the agent and it was not until the fur was safely housed on railroad property and the receipts were in his hands that he turned to the little log hotel for a late supper.

As he entered the dining room he was greeted by a wild cry and overwhelmed by a rushing black figure. Dazed, he realized that Beth's arms were around his neck and that her bright, laughing face was close to his.

Even as he stood there, returning her kisses but conscious that nothing less than a calamity had happened, he felt that he must forbid her to go to Lake Deception. Then he became aware of another presence in the room.

At first he did not comprehend. He had been swept off his feet by Beth's appearance and had instinctively reacted against it, for his plans would not permit her to remain at home. There was also, he knew, a great element of danger. The struggle with The Spider might flare into open hostilities at any moment and she must be sheltered not only from the danger but from the knowledge of it, and from the knowledge of how her father had died.

But through these imperative thoughts something else obtruded itself and his eyes kept turning toward the table. Several blue-clad railroad men sat there, a white trapper, a couple of half-breeds, a dark-skinned girl from the Rat Portage Mission. He saw them all, understood their presence, but across the room, facing him, beside the empty chair

Beth had vacated, was another girl — a white girl.

It was not alone her beauty that appealed to him — black hair and deep blue eyes framed by long, dark lashes above. Rod had seen beautiful women in New York and had remained untouched but here he felt something else than the beauty he saw, recognized dimly and wonderingly a personality behind it.

Men were rising from the table. Beth was leading him around to the other side.

"I want you to meet Marian Ransom," she said, "and Professor Ransom, Rod, Marian's father. Isn't it wonderful? They're going out to Lake Deception, too. They're going to stay all summer, studying the Indians. I mean the professor is," and she laughed excitedly.

Rod bowed to the girl, shook hands with her father.

"You knew Beth at college, I suppose," he said to Miss Ransom.

"Oh, no. We only met here two days ago."

He stared blankly.

"It is marvelous the way your sister makes friends," the girl explained. "I adore her already. I don't know whether it is because I know so little of the wilderness but she seems to me the bravest, most self-reliant person. It has encouraged me so to know we will see a great deal of her this summer."

"I see," Rod said, and some of the panic that had gripped him crept into his voice. "Beth has asked you to stay with us at Lake Deception?"

"Does that frighten you?" Miss Ransom laughed. "It needn't. You see, we made all arrangements early in the winter, with a neighbor of yours, I understand. For a time we are to be the guests of Mr. Cron and later he is to outfit us for a trip to the rice harvest."

Mention of The Spider's name only added to Rod's agitation. He tried to catch his sister's eye, but she was chatting with Professor Ransom and did not see his appealing glance.

11

Several people were leaving the table and in stepping back to permit them to pass Rod was able to hide his emotions. He had been conscious only of a mental protest that Miss Ransom should not have anything to do with The Spider, but as he found a seat opposite her he wondered why he should concern himself with what she did. Beth was his present problem. He knew that he must induce her not to go to Lake Deception. Then he looked up, squarely into the dark blue eyes, and again he revolted at the thought of this girl in any sort of contact with Aaron Cron.

"I think we are very fortunate," Miss Ransom said as she smiled across the table. "Our original plan was to go to Mr. Cron's post at Mattawa but this winter he wrote that he would be at Lake Deception and that he would meet us here in Heathcote. Then, when we arrived two days ago, we found your sister and she has helped me wonderfully. You see, this is my first glimpse of the wilderness and, despite the fact that father is an anthropologist, I am afraid some of the dread of Indians of my early Massachusetts ancestors remains."

Rod was not aware of the last of the sentence or even of the spell of her beauty.

"You knew The — knew Cron, then?" he asked.

"No, we have never seen him. Father wants to make a careful study of Ojibwa myths and folk tales ——"

"It is work that has never been attempted," Professor Ransom broke in excitedly. "I have tried for two years to induce my department in the university to send me out here. It is something that must be done soon, before the influence of the white people who will be brought in by this new railroad has destroyed primitive customs."

"Father learned from a fur company in Montreal that some pagan Ojibwas inhabit this district," his daughter explained, "and an official kindly put us in touch with Mr. Cron. He agreed to meet us here yesterday. But perhaps he sent word by you of when he will arrive?"

"No," Rod answered a little shortly.

"Don't you know when his brigade is coming?" Beth asked.

"I haven't any idea."

Miss Ransom looked quickly from Rod to his sister and did not speak again. But Beth, heedless, impetuous, rushed on.

"Then they can go in with us!" she exclaimed. "You'll start soon, won't you?"

"I plan to get away to-morrow noon," Rod answered.

"We can all go together!" Beth cried joyfully. "That will be such fun. And I wish the Ransoms would stay with us. We can make them so much more comfortable, can't we, Rod?"

Her brother hesitated. He had determined first of all that Beth should not return with him.

"That's very kind of you," Miss Ransom hastened to say, "but we couldn't think of it. We have made all the arrangements with Mr. Cron."

"But they can go with us," Beth insisted. "There's no reason for their waiting here. And Professor Ransom is so anxious to get to the post before the Indians scatter."

"Of course," Rod agreed. "I will be glad to take them in."

"As I understand it," the anthropologist said, "all the members of the band are gathered at Lake Deception at this time. Every day is precious and the sooner I get there the more I can accomplish."

"There are about three hundred Indians at the post now," Rod replied, "but they will scatter as soon as I get back. It will be August before they gather again at Lake Seigenagaw for the rice harvest."

"But couldn't they be induced to remain at the post for a short time?" Professor Ransom insisted.

"Easily," Rod laughed, "but that is where we will work at cross purposes. They will be perfectly willing to remain all summer but I will send them away as soon as I get home."

"Send them away!" Miss Ransom repeated. "I didn't suppose anyone could order an Indian about."

There was no mistaking her admiration of one who held three hundred Indians under his thumb. Rod saw it, flushed and then hastened to explain.

"They have to go. I simply starve them to it, make them get out into the bush and earn their living."

"But couldn't you let them stay a little while, for father?"

"I'd like to," he laughed, "but it's for their own good, you see. If they hung around the post they would run into debt, buying pork and flour instead of hunting and fishing. Then, in the fall, when they are outfitted for the winter's work, they would be so badly in debt they would become discouraged and not hunt."

"And you wouldn't get so much fur," the girl said quickly.

"That is true, of course," Rod answered, laughing at this questioning of his purpose. "It isn't strictly altruism on our part and yet the Indians themselves would suffer. With a small hunt they must go without necessities for themselves and their families. My grandfather came to Lake Deception in 1819, just seventy-five years ago. Some hunters there have never traded with anyone except a Norwood, and I don't think you'll find more contented or prosperous Indians anywhere.

"But Professor Ransom will have plenty of op-

portunity to see the Indians at Seigenagaw. They will all gather there for the rice harvest and then stay and dance for a week or two. Away from the post and all white people, they will be more like themselves."

"It's all very interesting," Miss Ransom said. "I'm looking forward so to leaving the railroad and getting into the real wilderness. To me there has always been something very colorful about the north. It has a romance peculiarly its own that makes a strong appeal, though I have never been outside of New England."

"Atavism," Rod laughed. "There was once color and romance in Massachusetts."

After supper Rod made an attempt to see Beth alone but she was talking to Professor Ransom in the little office and he was left to the daughter. Again he came under the direct influence of the blue eyes but he discovered something else than beauty. There was an air of competence and assurance about her and he noted, too, the inevitable marks of an academic life and of a New England ancestry. Yet they were not pronounced. Rather he sensed them, a sort of rigid framework beneath the softer and really charming exterior, and there was, it soon became apparent, a romantic conception of the north and its people, a delight in the new experience that was about to unfold.

Reluctantly, Rod excused himself at last and turned to Beth. "I'm going down to the camp and

make sure no one is peddling whiskey," he said. "Better come with me."

She caught a significant expression in his eyes and arose at once.

"What's the trouble, Rod?" she asked as soon as they were outside.

"Trouble?" he repeated. "Why did you come back?"

"Is there any reason why ——"

"Of course not," he hastened to say. "But it was understood — all arranged — you were to stay in Toronto."

"Rod, I'm a little beast!" the girl exclaimed. "I don't know why I ran away and left you there all alone. I was too dazed, too hurt, to think. I'll make it up to you, though. I'll stay until you go."

"But what will you do at the post? I'll be gone much of the summer. You take the next train back to Toronto."

She did not speak for a moment but she gripped his arm with both hands as they walked down the trail to the river and her fingers dug into his muscles.

"You're a dear," she said at last, "but I can't do it. I won't. And why haven't you told me? I'm not a child."

"Told you what?" he demanded gruffly but with fear gripping his heart.

"About the post, the money troubles."

"Oh!" he exclaimed with quick relief. "There

was nothing. I have a letter here that I wrote you on the way out. Enclosed a check. That other letter — I was pinched temporarily, that's all."

"Rod, I won't stand it. I'm not a child. There is something the matter."

"There isn't now. Dad merely ——"

"Mr. Claghom told me all ——"

"Claghom!" he interrupted furiously. "What has he said? What right had he —— ?"

"Don't blame him. After I got your letter telling me you couldn't send the money for the trip east, I knew from the way you wrote something was wrong. And I was sure Mr. Claghom would know. I had met him before. Father sent me to see him. He's an old bear, Rod, but it's all on the surface. And he admired dad so."

"But he had no right ——"

"I told you not to blame him. I went to him after I got your letter. I pretended you had told me and acted as if I only wanted to make sure. And he said — why, he said we were on the edge of bankruptcy."

"Why couldn't he have lied!" Rod exclaimed angrily.

"Then it is true!" Beth cried. "He did try to soften it. Told me not to worry, that you would pull out in fine shape in a few years. He was lovely. Said such wonderful things about dad. And you, too. Your letter pleased him so. But this can't go on. You can't sacrifice yourself."

"I'm not sacrificing anything," Rod declared.

"But your career! Your writing. You've worked for it so long. It's a crime for you to come back to the bush. You hate it so here. You can't do it."

"Listen, Beth," he interrupted sternly. "Get this straightened out first. I did find things in rather bad shape. Father wasn't the best business man if he was a marvel as a fur trader. He had expanded, with that new post, and The Spider was back, and he was sending us all the money we asked for.

"But that's past now. I got nearly all the fur at Lake Deception and Andy Parr cut into Cron badly at Black Sturgeon. We really did wonderfully well. Why, in another year or two we'll be a big, prosperous concern."

"Oh, Rod! That's wonderful! I knew you had it in you but that doesn't make it right. You told me what the north would do to you and you're different already. You're harder, colder. Even your eyes have changed. You haven't laughed once as you used to. Please give it up. All the fur in Canada isn't worth what is being killed in you."

"Nonsense!" he interrupted gruffly. "It will do me good. It's the thing I need. I was getting soft. And there isn't much more of it. Why," and he stopped and faced his sister in an effort to convince her that he spoke the truth, "I have every hope of selling out this fall. I expect to be in New York by Christmas."

"Really!" she cried joyously. "So soon as that?"

"Perhaps sooner. Perhaps this summer. Meanwhile, I'm going to be very busy. May have to go to Toronto," and he exulted as he saw that she believed him. "That's why you're going back there now."

"But I'm not!" she declared. "I'm going on home with you. I won't——"

She stopped, for she had caught the swift gleam of fear in his eyes. For a moment she stood there, searching his face, and then she said calmly:

"You haven't been telling me the truth. Things haven't been going as you say. Mr. Claghom told me it was serious. And I won't go back, Rod! I won't be an expense to you. I won't be the reason for your staying away from New York and all that it means to you. If you stay, I do. It's my job, too."

Rod argued, protested, commanded, but Beth was adamant and in the face of feminine methods he found himself helpless. She mingled tears and praise of his sacrifice, endearments and passionate revolt, heedless insistence and sharp divination, and in the end she won.

As he sought to dissuade her, Rod not only saw how disadvantageous her presence at Lake Deception would be but how his hands were tied by the real state of affairs. More than anything else, he wished to spare her the details of her father's death and at last, driven, cross-examined and defied, he sought a compromise.

"All right," he agreed. "If you'll promise to make it a short visit. I can't bear the thought of you there alone later in the summer, when I'll be away so much, and there's no need of it. Promise you'll go back after six weeks."

"Two months," she insisted. "I'll promise that if you'll let me see the books — show me things are as you say."

"All right."

"And I won't be lonesome. Marian Ransom will be there. Isn't she lovely, Rod? I fell in love with her at first sight. And she's the most competent person. The professor is like a child and she has to do everything. Don't you think she is beautiful?"

"Fairly so."

"You old bear! You know she is. She was awfully anxious to see you. I had told her so many things about you."

"How did they ever happen to get in with The Spider?"

"She explained that. But we can have them over often. It's only across the bay."

"But Cron! His post is not a fit place for them. They ought to be told."

She glanced at his face and laughed.

"Don't worry about Marian Ransom. She'll take care of herself."

Rod did not see Marian again that night. In the morning he was up early and had finished breakfast before they had come down stairs. He rounded

up his Indians and at once began the transportation of several tons of supplies from the station to the river.

Ordinarily the brigade remained at Heathcote a day or two. The Canadian Pacific Railroad was still a new and marvelous thing to the canoemen and they were entranced by the arrival and departure of a passenger train. Some of the more adventurous would enter the cars and walk through. Occasionally they did not get off before the train had started and received a tumble along the right of way as a result. Such episodes furnished much laughter in lonely wigwams through a long winter.

But Rod, who had already given evidence of ignoring some of the more leisurely customs of his father, permitted only a half hour of contact with civilization when the morning passenger train arrived. As soon as it was gone he started the long line of heavily burdened men to the waiting canoes and before noon he was ready to depart.

"I am going to ride with Professor Ransom," Beth announced. "He learned Ojibwa from a missionary's dictionary and needs a lot of help."

"None of these men appear to understand a word I said," the anthropologist explained in a bewildered manner. "I acquired a vocabulary of five hundred words and the phonetic key was so simple I was sure of my pronunciation."

"That's the trouble," Rod smiled. "You probably know the pure Ojibwa. I don't. These Indians

can hardly understand the Savanne band, for instance. It's dialect, but Beth knows it."

"If Miss Norwood only would help me!" the professor exclaimed. "I must be able to understand the language if I am to collect myths. Now, for instance, the negative. How do you say it? *Kah-win?*"

"It's really *kah-ween,*" Beth laughed, "and you can express a dozen emotions or a whole page of English in the way you draw out the '*ween*' or accent the first or last syllable."

"Yes! Yes! I see. Now tell me. Do these Indians pronounce the surd and sonant dorsal sibilant with the tip of the tongue deflected to lower alveolar?"

Marian Ransom, who stood beside her father, turned quickly away, her shoulders shaking, but Beth hesitated only a moment.

"That depends," she said. "There's quite a variation. Give me an example and I'll tell you."

Rod left them to find their seats in the canoe he had indicated and turned to assist Marian to a place in his own craft.

"I like your sister so much," she said. "She's — well ——"

"Not what you expected after a life in the bush?" he asked.

"I didn't mean that at all," was the indignant reply. "But there is a quality I'm not accustomed to in girls. There is a freshness, a courage, a daring.

Perhaps it is the wilderness and what it —— Please don't think I'm silly. I don't feel that I am, and yet you don't know how I have looked forward to this expedition."

He had helped her to a seat in one of the big canoes. Indians were leaping over the tops of the loads to their places in the bows, others were grasping the sterns ready to shove off. Paddles were digging into the water and shrill cries, shouts, commands and laughter echoed between the spruce-lined banks of the narrow stream.

One canoe got away, the stern man springing to his place, and the four paddles flashing frantically. The shouting rose to a higher pitch as others shoved off. Canoes collided and were thrust furiously apart. The hysterical efforts of the natives did not cease until leadership had been established and the flotilla's order had been determined by speed and cleverness.

To Marian Ransom, embarked upon her first journey in the north, it was a colorful but bewildering moment. She had always thought of Indians as being haughty, silent, impassive creatures but these men were as excitable as school boys. While she was trying to adjust herself to this new idea of them she became conscious of a new hysteria. The shouting began again, countless warnings were screamed back and forth, black eyes flashed apprehensively downstream, to the shore and back to the following canoes.

So interested in them had she become, Marian did not see the rapids, even when the leading canoe began

to pitch and rear and slop its heavy, cumbersome way through the churning, twisting wave-crested current. Then the canoe in which she was riding darted into the thick of it.

The shoutings and shrill warnings doubled. Paddles flashed furiously, spray dashed high and then cries of alarm, of sheer panic, rose above the roar of the river.

Marian grasped the side of the canoe and looked in terror at the shore. If the Indians were so afraid, the danger must be great, but when she turned to Rod she saw that he was unconcernedly checking the flimsy sheets of a railroad bill of lading. She was about to speak when the uproar and the sound of rushing water ceased. They were gliding peacefully in a swift current and the Indians had settled to a quick, steady stroke that caused the rocky, spruce-crowned banks to slip by at startling speed.

"I thought surely we would all be drowned!" she gasped.

Rod laughed as he folded up his papers.

"They're always that way in a crowd," he said. "All of them have done that time and again. They know there is little danger, but they get worked up just the same. What's the trouble? Are your colorful ideas of the north beginning to fade?"

The girl hesitated a moment before replying.

"Please don't laugh at me," she begged. "It isn't just a whim or eagerness for something new. It ——" She paused and looked at him as if trying to

determine how much she might reveal. "Perhaps you won't understand. Beth says you don't like the wilderness — that you always found it ugly."

"That doesn't mean I don't understand it," Rod answered. "The Norwoods have been fur traders for a hundred years. I know how the north held them. They were — well, not exactly boys with chips on their shoulders, but they were men and there was something in them, a sort of reckless daring. My father had it. You would have found color there. There was something in him that responded to the defiance, the threat, of the north."

"That's it!" she exclaimed, "The challenge of distance and isolation and cold and hunger and danger. And the men, those who accept it, accept the challenge and the terms of the struggle. I think — please understand — I think there's something like that in me."

Rod had no desire to smile. He saw that she was striving to explain to herself more than to him, that she was in the grip of emotions she could not quite analyze, emotions that brought a strange, disturbing mixture of joy and fear.

"The prospect of entering the wilderness has uncovered a primitive strain that you never suspected," he said. "It's rather appalling to a modern New England mind but why should it be? Don't you see that you are only distressing yourself? If your heart demands a thrill, is responding to something, let it. Don't be so sure your mental reactions are right. It

is possible, you know, for training and tradition to go wrong."

She looked up as he finished speaking and he received the full effect of those deep blue eyes as they glowed beneath the black lashes and brows.

"You do understand!" she exclaimed, with no attempt to disguise her gratitude. "You've helped me to. It must be a primitive streak and all the time I——"

"You were horrified," Rod smiled. "I can't imagine a worse bugaboo, in New England, than such a discovery."

"You may laugh," she conceded. "You've earned the right."

"And now, to get back to the fading colors. You are disappointed, first in the Indians because they act like excitable children instead of somber, stately savages, and also in me because I don't wear fringed buckskin clothes and a full beard."

"I'm not disappointed in you but I could be," she retorted, and again he sensed that rigid framework beneath the soft exterior. "The colors haven't faded. They have only changed. But one thing hasn't changed. It must be true that a man who has survived the north is a man. He'd have to be to survive."

"He must keep moving or freeze to death," Rod laughed.

"No," she said seriously, "I'm thinking of the spiritual side. With a freedom that could so easily

be changed to license, with the inspiriting challenge of the land always before him, there can be no half-way measures. A man would grow clean and strong or he would go to the other extreme and become despicable in every way."

There was a conviction in her tone that was almost passionate. Rod was about to smile and then as he looked at her he again caught a fleeting suggestion of challenge.

"You admit your own primitive streak but won't grant the men one," he retorted.

"No, but I refuse to grant that to be primitive means to be bestial or cowardly or small," she answered vehemently. "There is no reason——"

The bow of the canoe struck the bank and the two canoemen behind leaped over their heads and ashore. The leading craft were already being unloaded and wild excitement again prevailed among the Indians.

"What has happened?" Marian asked in fresh bewilderment.

"The primitive natures of these men seem to find great pleasure in racing across a portage with two hundred pounds on their backs," Rod explained with a grin. "And you'll have to turn your primitive side out, too, because you couldn't expect chivalry of them. They won't carry you."

Marian laughed and turned to the trail that led up a rocky ridge and which was already filled with toiling Indians.

12

Several times in the days that followed Rod found himself marveling that he gave so little heed to Beth's return or even to his struggle with The Spider. That night at Heathcote he had looked upon his sister's return to Lake Deception as little less than a calamity and he had been appalled by the thought of Marian Ransom coming in contact with Cron.

Now, when he was practically alone with Marian through the long June days, when he had only to turn his head to catch the full effect of what to him was that priceless combination of blue eyes and black lashes and hair, all other considerations seemed to fade. Where he had lived entirely in the future, he now thought only of the present.

The Indians did not vary their usual brigade customs because of the strangers. Before four o'clock in the morning the head guide beat a frying pan against a rock and aroused the camp and, though he stopped twice during the day for meals, it was always after nine o'clock before he called a halt for supper and the night camp.

In those long hours between, broken only by portages and the two lunches, Rod and Marian sat side by

side in the center of one of the big canoes. Two Indians paddled in front, two behind, but none understood a word of English. On lake or river the six canoes were strung out and the young fur trader and the girl had the wilderness to themselves.

The weather was brilliant, as the Canadian June often is, softening the land, bringing the enchantment of color and peace, of beauty and solitude. To those who know and love the north there is nothing comparable with the island-dotted blue lakes, circled by the rock-lined, spruce-crowned shores, with unbroken expanse of low, forest-clothed ridges, with beckoning portage trails, white-walled by slender birch as they lead over the hills to the unknown beyond.

It is in June that the north veils mystery with beauty, grimness with color, bleakness with the splendor of sunshine. And yet the veils are always parting to permit glimpses of the real significance of the spirit of the land, to give hints of hazards and their acceptance, of distance and its challenge, of danger and its defiance, of all the tempting adventure of discovery and resistless romance of conquest that belong alone to the vast empire of fur.

None of this escaped Marian Ransom. She caught instantly the suggestive features and responded to them. Her questions were pertinent. She clothed Rod's sometimes commonplace replies with her imagination, and before the end of the first day he suddenly understood that here was something else than a whim or surface interest in novelty.

"I was right," he said, and there was a trace of awe in his tone. "You are a throw-back. No newcomer ever caught so quickly the real spirit of the country."

"Do you think so?" she exclaimed eagerly.

"You see it as my father saw it. And do you know what it means?"

"What?"

"That there's something of the savage in you."

"What a dreadful thing to say!"

"What else can it be that responds to a savage environment?" Rod demanded. "And it isn't so dreadful, it it?"

"Just startling, perhaps," she admitted. "Only you speak as if there were nothing of the savage in you, and as if you were proud of the fact."

"I don't think there is any," he answered. "I was born here but I was glad to get away and sorry to have to come back."

"I don't believe that entirely," Marian said seriously. "There was too much sympathy in what you have told me, too much understanding of the country. Not just knowledge. But I can't imagine anyone turning very savage in the presence of all this beauty."

They always escaped thus from rather revealing analysis, but personalities crept into the conversation more and more. For hours and hours they sat side by side, talking, dreaming, animated and lapsing into long silences. In the last, perhaps, was the true index

of their relationship. In cities people talk to understand each other, and seldom succeed. In the wilderness a mute interval may span months of civilization's guarded conversations.

It was during one of these silent periods, just before sunset, that Rod, relaxing comfortably in his seat, felt his shoulder touch Marian's. This had happened before, when the canoe tossed in rapids or swayed over a wave crest, but now it was utterly different. For a moment he did not move, was tense with a new and nameless thrill, and then he slowly turned his head.

Marian turned also. Their eyes met fairly, without attempt at concealment. Still wordless, they spoke, a language bare of all save essential truth, a language dazzlingly definite.

For a moment Rod was stunned by the very wonder of it and then unconsciously he sought her hand and received an answering pressure. Still Marian's eyes had not faltered but remained bravely steadfast, scorning the shelter of maidenly reticence.

Then they both looked ahead, though their hands remained clasped.

"When it comes like that!" Rod whispered huskily.

"I never dreamed of it — until then," she answered with the same awe in her voice.

A sudden shouting and the swirling of water beneath twisting paddles broke the spell. The leading canoe had turned shoreward — the signal for the night's stop — and then Indians called excitedly from

craft to craft. Rod and Marian found their canoe beside Beth's and Professor Ransom's.

"You should hear your father jabber," Beth called. "I never had such a pupil."

Marian and Rod smiled in answer. Neither could speak and yet each realized that he was without embarrassment. Rod found himself marveling that he did not blush, that Marian did not, and then he felt that here was something far removed from a simpering pretense of passion or an illusion of love — that a union of spirit had come to them with the unexpectedness of a lightning flash and with its searing, blinding, welding power.

When Rod went to sleep that night he was still dazzled by the glory of Marian's capitulation. It had been so frank, so unexpectedly contrary to that suggestion of challenge and unbending spirit which he had first sensed in her, and which had both fascinated and aroused him, that there was little room in his mind for anything except the wonder of it.

But love and its demands brought questions as to the future, the necessity of his remaining in the wilderness, his struggle with The Spider and the possible consequences of the course upon which he had determined.

Yet he felt something vague about these things. They seemed indistinct, far off. His mind insisted upon returning to blue eyes and the manner in which they had looked into his, to the still incomprehensible thrill caused by the touching of shoulders.

The next morning the blue eyes greeted him with that same steady, acknowledging glance but when the brigade was under way the old relationship was resumed. They talked of the north, of things they passed, of themselves and their opinions, discovering with the amazed delight of new-found lovers a sympathy and an understanding which only completed the miracle of what had come to them.

Only once did they touch upon the thing that had happened the previous evening. There had been a long silence and then Rod said:

"A few days ago I had never heard of you."

Marian laughed softly, glanced quickly at him, and the silence continued.

Three hours after the morning start the canoes entered a bay and landed. As Rod helped Marian ashore, the head guide spoke to him in Ojibwa. Marian went on up the trail, walking slowly, stepping aside to permit the straining, grunting packers to glide past.

The girl had come to enjoy these breaks in the water journey. The portage is peculiarly the north's own, and it is symbolic of the north. It represents toil and obstacle and yet it summons with constant allure. It may thread its way softly beneath beautiful birch and pine. It may climb precariously to the rim of a granite-walled gorge through which an angry, roaring river smashes its way.

Sometimes it seeks the dismal, unchanging and eerie depths of the vast spruce swamps, and again the bare crests of rocky ridges and unfolds an endless

sweep of green carpet, mottled and streaked by the blue and silver of lake and river.

But always it beckons, and always it is mysterious. Like the north itself, the portage thwarts and enchants, disheartens and enthralls, lures with promise and rewards with a sense of conquest.

Marian Ransom felt all this, was conscious of the appeal of these fancy-arousing trails. She liked to people them with those who had come first — with the resolute, black-robed Jesuits, the eager, reckless voyageurs, the steady, dauntless Scotch. And always they were courageous, always strong men with light step and high heads.

Though the girl walked slowly, peopling her dream world, Rod did not overtake her. She went on, climbing gradually, until suddenly she came to an open space with a vast swamp lying before her. As she stood there, looking down, she saw several Indians toiling up the slope. They passed her, turning their heads beneath the taut headstraps for furtive, curious glances, and slipped on down the trail by which she had come.

As she understood that these were the men of another trader, she looked down into the swamp where a bit of portage was visible among the spruce and saw something that held her breathless at the edge of the cliff. For a moment she believed it was a man mired to the hips in the muskeg and then she saw him jerking forward with queer leaps and realized that he was legless.

She drew back with mingled horror and pity. To her the wilderness had always been the home of big, strong men, of tireless bodies, of brave deeds, of prowess and courage. She found something terrible and cruel in the thought of anyone in the forest being denied the use of what seemed so essential.

Marian started on but with the first step she saw that she must meet this man, must walk easily and surely past him while he toiled so desperately up the ridge. She could hear him now, just beneath her, and urged by compassion and by dread she retreated into the brush.

In a moment the legless man appeared, swinging himself forward with his arms. Even as she pitied him, she marveled at his strength. She could not see his eyes. He was low and the wide, flopping brim of a black hat hid his face. She wished she might catch a glimpse of his features, for admiration of such determination mingled with her compassion.

The Spider stopped in the middle of the open space before her and Marian glanced up to see Rod swinging out of the brush on the other side. Her heart leaped as he came forward. She gloried in his strength and vigor, and quickly forgot her pity for the other man.

And then Rod stopped, only a few feet from the other. She saw with amazement that his body was tense, his hands clenched, but it was his face that held her. The mad, passionate hatred of a primitive man was blazing from his eyes, distorting his fea-

tures. He seemed about to hurl himself forward in murderous fury.

Her fascination tinged with terror, Marian watched this strange scene. She felt that it had lasted for hours — these two silently confronting each other — and then the legless man spoke.

"Bo' jou', Roddy. What's eatin' you?"

Rod's rage seemed to flare to incandescence. He took one swift step toward the motionless figure in his path and then sprang to one side and rushed past the girl's hiding place, leaving behind him an aura of blinding passion.

When The Spider had disappeared, Marian emerged from the brush and started slowly down the ridge. At last a portage had led to mystery, to the brutal, primal drama of a raw land, and yet she found herself recoiling from it, shuddering before such unmasked savagery.

In that moment her attitude toward Rod remained unchanged. There had been a strange, bitter-sweet thrill in seeing his soul stripped and unshackled but there was still a sympathy for the legless man, a touch of admiration for one who evidently had conquered not only the north but had done so despite an appalling handicap.

When she reached the end of the portage she saw the canoes being loaded at the bank of a small, marsh-bordered river. Rod was out there, directing the work, his back toward her. As Marian waited to let some of the Indians pass on the poles that bridged

the ooze, she heard Beth call her name and turned to see the girl and her father hovering over a smudge on higher ground at the edge of the spruce.

"Better come over here," Beth said. "It will be half an hour before we start and the mosquitoes are bad."

"Well," she continued as she fanned the smoke about Marian with lazy sweeps of her hat, "what did you think of your future host?"

"Host?" Marian repeated blankly.

"Yes. Aaron Cron, though you won't hear him called that very often in the bush. The Indians named him Ehe-bik long ago."

"You don't mean —— ?" Marian began.

"The man without legs," Beth laughed. "The Spider. Didn't you speak to him?"

"Why no," Marian hesitated. "I saw him. How can you jest about such a thing? I felt so sorry for him I hid in the brush while he went by. But I never dreamed it was ——"

"He'll like that," Beth said mischieviously. "You will be the first who has ever expressed any sympathy. The Spider has always been able to take care of himself."

Marian's thoughts flashed back to Rod's arrival in the dining room at Heathcote and for the first time she caught the significance of his short replies to inqueries as to Cron's plans.

"Is he — Mr. Cron — does he operate a rival post at Lake Deception?" she asked.

"He has tried to for nearly twenty years," Beth answered. "Dad drove him out three times but he always came back. Dad loved those battles but I'm afraid — I guess The Spider won out after all, in a way."

"You mean because he is still there?"

"Partly, but he really cost us more than dad dreamed. If it hadn't been for The Spider, Rod could have sold the post and would be back in New York now, doing the thing he ought to do."

"You mean his writing?" Marian asked.

"Of course. And it's a shame!" Beth became suddenly vehement. "Now he's staying here just to make enough money to provide for me."

"You said your father drove Mr. Cron out," Marian began. "You don't mean ——?"

"Just out-traded him," Beth explained. "I think dad used to enjoy having The Spider come. He loved the fight."

"But Rod ——"

"Oh, Rod doesn't, of course. He says he got most of the fur this year. I wonder if The Spider is coming back."

"He doesn't seem to be greatly handicapped by his lack of legs," Professor Ransom said.

"Why, that's absolutely the first thing you've showed an interest in besides Indians," Beth laughed.

"I am a scientist," he answered simply. "I am interested in all things which are not commonplace, known to everyone. This man, not only physically but

otherwise, is out of the ordinary. He gives one an impression of power, of purpose. He seems to have a mind, or a will, that dwarfs his physical limitations, that makes one forget he is legless."

"He is stubborn," Beth conceded, "and I guess he has a will. That is why he is alive to-day. Most any other man would have died but The Spider just decided he wouldn't."

"You mean when he lost his legs?" Marian asked hesitantly.

"The professor's scientific interest will be aroused by that story," Beth laughed, "but it will give you the creeps, Marian."

"I would like to hear it."

Beth told the story with all the trimmings of the Indian imagination, for she had never heard it from her father. She did not omit the cannabalistic theories of the Ojibwa hunters nor their credulous conjectures as to the supernatural powers The Spider might possess because he was believed to have eaten his own legs.

"What a horrible, horrible story!" Marian exclaimed. "I don't see how you can even tell it."

"Oh, I've heard it ever since I can remember and, of course, things do get rather gruesome up here occasionally."

"And now, this man, he is trying to ruin Rod as he tried to ruin your father?"

"It amounts to that, in a way," Beth laughed, "but the fur trade has always been like that. It's always

a fight and the rules — well, they were made a long time ago and have never been changed. It's like love. All's fair, only there are never any hard feelings."

"You mean that men remain friends?" Marian asked.

"Of course. Dad didn't hate The Spider. I think he would have been disappointed if Cron hadn't kept coming back. He would call on The Spider, chat like an old friend, and drink with him. It sounds funny but it's true. It's just the way the fur trade has always been."

"And Rod. How does he feel toward Mr. Cron?"

"Much the same, I imagine, as he would about a storm that tied him up on a big lake when he was in a hurry," Beth answered.

"But doesn't he — is there any reason ——?"

"What has Rod been telling you?" Beth demanded quickly.

"Nothing. I just wondered. Rod has never said anything."

"Oh, Rod's upset because he couldn't sell the post, I suppose, and because he has to stay here. But he understands. He wouldn't hold that against The Spider."

Beth spoke with the assurance of one who understood the situation. There had been nothing in her words that would give the impression of anything except a business rivalry and yet Marian had never seen such hatred as blazed from Rod's eyes — never had believed such passion possible.

She turned from the smudge and walked away. She felt that her questions had been treacherous, a deliberate spying upon Rod, and yet a thought had come to her — one against which she struggled but that persisted. It did not seem possible he could hate thus solely because a legitimate business conquest had wrecked his plans and had torn him from New York and the work he loved.

Marian had capitulated unquestioningly, for from the first she had woven the glamor and the romance of the north about Rod, had given him the strength, the freshness and the breadth of the land in which he lived. Now she demanded fiercely that he continue to wear this colorful raiment.

She told herself that he did, that he was all she first believed him to be, and yet she could not forget that meeting on the trail, could not evade the thought that her own imagination may have cloaked a petty and ignoble spirit that wreaked upon a helpless cripple the wrath of a thwarted child.

Rod was calling to them. The canoes were loaded. Marian made her way out to the river, but she hesitated behind Rod as he stood ready to help her in. Then he looked around and she saw that his face was drawn, his eyes hard.

"Won't you take father with you?" she asked quickly. "There are so many things he wants to talk with you about."

"Why yes," he answered, a little startled. "If you ——"

"Oh, I'll enjoy being with Beth," she interrupted. "Here, father. I am going to give you that chance to talk with Rod for a while. Come on," and she took Beth's hand and climbed into the other canoe.

Professor Ransom was delighted to make the change. There were many things he wished to ask the young trader, and he made haste to clamber into Rod's craft.

13

When the brigade started Marian saw an opportunity to draw Beth out, to learn more of the situation at Lake Deception, of the fur trade in general, that she might better understand Rod. Yet as they went on she found herself recoiling from what she feared to be the truth.

The low, depressing swamp was all about them, one section of it exactly like any other. The Indians were too busy working the canoes through shoals and around the sharp bends to indulge in their customary happy chatter. Sometimes the heavily loaded craft would stick in the mud and soon the six were far apart. The silence of the wilderness was broken only by the grunts of the straining boatmen.

It was dismal, awesomely so. Mosquitoes came in swarms. The sun beat down through the lifeless, humid air. After the broad sweep of the lakes, the swift rush of the river and the beckoning charm of the portages, the sluggish stream in the swamp sapped the girl's spirit.

The color and the romance with which she had always clothed the north began to fade. Drab, toiling progress took the place of the quick leap

of a light canoe. Discomfort and depressing heat, insects in maddening clouds, the confining walls of the dark spruce, all had their effect.

Marian wondered if all were to be disillusionment, if the strong, virile men with whom she had peopled the wilderness were in reality petty youths and legless men, if the ways of the north were not those of strong characters but of stealthy, tricky traders.

She fought the doubts with her memories of that moment when she and Rod had looked into each other's eyes, of the glory and the resistless magic of it. She wanted to believe in him. The need of faith became a torment. It would be so simple if she might trust blindly, yet she could not ignore a cherished tenet that mind and emotions should be in accord. Desperately, seeking a justification for Rod's hatred that she felt must exist, she turned to Beth.

"From what you have told us, I imagine the fur trade has a code all its own," she said with an effort to be casual.

"All its own," Beth repeated with a laugh. "And I'm afraid you wouldn't approve of it."

"Why not?"

Beth did not answer immediately. Since the beginning, trickery and stealth have paved the lonely ways of the north. English and French kings bestowed upon favorites vast empires to which they had no right. Monopolies sought dominion in a land already penetrated by daring, skin-clad commoners.

Open resistence was impossible and equally so was

a suppression of the poacher in a wilderness far greater than all Europe. Subterfuge and stealth were necessary to survival and thus there was developed a code, never written and seldom expressed, which permitted deception, spying and craftiness. Diaries of the French of the seventeenth century, or the English of the eighteenth and of the Canadians of the nineteenth, possess a striking similarity in detailing the methods of gathering pelts.

So firmly fixed is this code, it is never questioned. Beth Norwood, born and reared in fur land, had listened to countless stories of the activities of her father and grandfather and her respect for both had only grown. But at college she had discovered the existence of another business standard and the general attitude toward it and she doubted her ability to make Marian understand the wilderness strife as she understood it.

"Do you mean that the fur trade code permits theft, physical violence, things of that sort?" Marian insisted.

"No," Beth replied. "There were cases of that sort in the old days. My great-grandfather went through it. But that isn't what I mean."

"Then one trader doesn't steal another's fur or trade goods?"

"Where did you ever get such an idea?" Beth laughed. "Of course not. They just spy on one another, try to learn the opposition's plans, mislead the hunters. Oh, there are countless tricks."

"And that's the way your father and Mr. Cron fought?"

"It's the way dad fought. The Spider's not the cleverest person in the world. He doesn't know when he's licked — that's all."

Marian let the subject rest there. She saw that Beth did not even suspect Rod's attitude toward Cron and that she could throw no further light upon the thing that troubled her.

"Thank goodness, we'll be out of this swamp soon!" Beth exclaimed as she struck at a cloud of mosquitoes with her hat. "We are coming to a big lake and the wind will keep the pests away."

They made camp that night on the farther end of the lake of which Beth had spoken. In the long twilight after supper, the north, as if propitiating for what it had done to Marian during the day, appeared in its most entrancing aspect.

The four white people sat on a great, flat rock near the camp. A tiny moss smudge kept the few mosquitoes away. The suffocating, humid air of the swamp and the fire of the sun beating down into the lifeless air of the muskeg stream were forgotten in the delightfully refreshing atmosphere.

Directly before them, stretching into the northwest, was a long arm of the lake and at the end the sun had set behind a low ridge and a thin bank of clouds. On the sides of the arm were little coves, hidden by low, rocky points to which stunted spruce and cedar clung. Halfway to the end were two islets, spurs of

granite that thrust above the surface and were crowned by dwarfed trees.

A tranquility possible only in a wilderness evening, a peace as soothing as the delicate blending of the soft, marvelous colors that filled the sky and found mellowing reflection in the water, settled about the camp as gently as the lengthening shadows.

Smoke from the smudges and dying campfire floated slowly out and spread over the water in a thin, gray mantle. The faint murmur of the Indians' voices drifted up from the beach and only accentuated the solitude and the silence. Occasionally a fish leaped and fell back with a splash that blended with, rather than shattered, the stillness, while the widening ripples set the soft hues to dancing.

Marian, entranced, breathless, marveling that a land that had seemed so harsh could suddenly become so seductively lovely, was roused by a faint sound beside her. She turned to see Rod lying at full length, his head propped by an elbow, and as she looked a flood of pity swept over her, of charity and understanding.

All the hardness and tensity were gone from the young man's face. There was no sign of the passion that had engulfed him in the morning. He lay there perfectly relaxed, abandoning himself to the beauty of the scene and his rapture in it.

In that moment Marian believed she understood Rod Norwood. She saw him as an artist, as one of those rare, softer souls capable of infinite appreciation

of beauty and perhaps of creation. She realized what it must have meant to be torn from work he loved and be thrust into the harsh, remorseless existence of a fur trader.

Rod became conscious of her scrutiny and glanced up. His eyes were still empty of all except receptiveness, still deluged by the sensuous blending of delicate color, and then they flashed with the fervor of adoration.

"Marian!" he whispered. "Do you get it? Aren't you drunk with it? What is there in color — a thing you can't touch and yet can feel — that comes to you only as light reflected to the eye, a light softer than any zephyr, and yet hits you like a drug?"

He turned to the lake and was lost in the changing glory of the scene. Marian became aware of Beth sitting just beyond her brother. The girl was staring, as unconsciously as Rod, but at him, not at the sunset. Her dark eyes were brooding, the charm of her frank, vivacious face was clouded, and then two tears ran down her checks.

She sprang to her feet and started away. Marian, understanding, moved by compassion, arose and followed but she did not catch the girl until she had entered their tent. There Beth stood, her hands clenched, her head thrown back defiantly, though she still wept.

"It's a crime!" she cried. "He shan't do it! I won't let him. Did you see that? It was the real

Rod. It's what he ought to be. He's a poet at heart. He was never made for this, up here. And it's killing something in him."

Marian reached forth both hands but Beth jerked away.

"Don't pity me!" she exclaimed. "Pity him. It's poison for him. It's ruining him. And he thinks I'm going to let him do it."

"But it's Rod's problem," Marian said. "You can't——"

"I will — sometime — this summer!"

She turned resolutely to a small pack that contained her belongings and was busy with the fastenings.

"Don't let this late sunset fool you," she advised calmly. "Those Indians will be beating a frying pan before you know it. We'd better turn in."

The next morning Marian took her place in Rod's canoe. She both dreaded and looked forward to their day together. For, despite the valiant denial of her heart, doubts still persisted and brought a curious sense of incompleteness in the harmony of their companionship.

Rod had lost all traces of his meeting with The Spider. He was again as she had first known him, smiling, happy, altogether a delightful companion. For a time his joy in again being alone with her blinded him to her silences, to the absence of a bright enthusiasm that had first attracted him. At last when a whispered question remained unanswered he turned.

"What's the matter?" he demanded. "Too much traveling? Isn't that head guide giving you enough time for sleep?"

"I am tired," she said.

She wanted to talk to Rod about The Spider and yet she could not, for fear that his answers would only increase her disappointment or her pity. She hardly knew which reaction she dreaded most. Neither was worthy of the forceful, vigorous spirit with which her imagination had first clothed him.

The Rod she had seen in the entrancement of the sunset, the youth who had brought tears to his sister's eyes, was not an ignoble figure. He was a gentle soul, unsuited for rough combat or the generous acknowledge of defeat, not a dominant man who conquered an hostile environment and whose touch had thrilled her that first day.

"I think I understand," he said gently. "There was an intoxication a little too strong for the New England attitude. I'm groggy yet."

"Please."

She was frankly pleading and there was a note of real distress in her voice.

"I'm sorry," he answered. "I only wanted to help. I understand how doubts might come."

"It was inevitable!" Marian exclaimed. "I want to ask you — please — please forget that moment."

He saw that she was desperately serious and yet he felt it would be unjust to permit her to shut the door upon that memory.

"Forget it! Not as long as I live! I couldn't. And," he leaned toward her tensely, "you can't — ever. No, Marian! A thing like that! There can't be a mistake when it comes that way."

Her body stiffened as if in defense.

"I won't promise to forget it," he continued, and then his voice became gentle and understanding. "But I won't mention it. How's that? I'll give you — let me see — a whole week to get used to me, acquainted. That's fair."

For a moment the girl was tempted to lay all the confusion of her thoughts before him, to tell how desirous she had been to acknowledge dominance, how eagerly she had searched for a stronger spirit than her own, one that would command both her mind and her heart.

But doubts and questionings were still too vague to be phrased with justice and she realized that she must make her readjustment alone. Through his offer there lay escape for the present.

"All right," she said.

The brigade reached Lake Deception late in the afternoon of the fourth day. Beth had already planned that the Ransoms were to remain with them until The Spider's return, and in the short interval before supper she was busy making them comfortable in their rooms. Rod went at once to the trade shop with Andy Parr.

"Something funny's happened," the old trader said as soon as they were alone in the little office. "I

can't get these bow-and-arrows started away from the post."

"Perhaps they're waiting for me," Rod suggested. "There's always been a Norwood in charge here, you know."

"I thought of that but it don't seem to explain things. Maybe you can get at it to-morrow. Not a hunter or his family has left."

"I'll end that," Rod said confidently. "And now you had better get started for Black Sturgeon. The Spider won't be back for six or seven days and it would be a good thing to have your Indians out of the way."

"You met Cron, eh?"

"On Trout portage. Nee-hau-bee-nis, the head guide, told me the Black Sturgeon men were beginning to do quite a bit of talking. The more they think about it the more scared of The Spider they're becoming. They knew he would be going out and were afraid of meeting him on a portage."

"He works under cover. He couldn't do anything on a portage," Andy said.

"He might, if he had met them alone. He could easily have told them something that would have started a fine panic. But Beth and Professor Ransom met him first and while they were talking the men went by with the first loads. Then I kept your canoemen at the river so Cron wouldn't see them again."

Andy chuckled.

"What did you see at Heathcote?" he asked. "He bringing much stuff in?"

"More than ever. He's got enough trade goods in the station for half the district. That's going to be a big loss, though he doesn't know it."

"Then he's not quitting here?"

"No, and I'm glad of it," Rod said. "The longer he stays the more it will cost him, and according to the information I have from Toronto, he's not any too well off financially."

He turned from the desk, where he had been stuffing some papers into a pigeonhole. He was alert, eager, and the old trader, studying him through a thick cloud of pipe smoke, received the impression of something more than enthusiasm.

"Another year and we'll be in Mattawa!" Rod cried. "You keep it up at Black Sturgeon and I'll keep him busy here. Even after The Spider is finished we don't have to stop. There are a lot of others we can lick. In two years, three at the most, we can be doing twice the business dad ever did."

Only Rod knew how much that memorable day in the canoe had done to give him a definite objective in life. Andy stared. He wanted to say something but he found he could not. His real desire was to shout. There had been a special significance in Rod's last statement. Somehow another Norwood had risen to take his rightful place. Rod's first hot passion to avenge his father's death now carried a trader's zeal behind it.

"I told you I was ordering twenty-five per cent more trade goods for Black Sturgeon," Rod continued impetuously. "Well, on the way to Heathcote I decided to increase that."

"You're not going too heavy, are you?"

"Don't worry. You and I are going to need it. But I ordered all the extra stuff held over. It won't get in until late this summer. Cron won't know about it until it lands here. Far as he can see, we're going along at the same old pace. Then in the fall, when it's too late for him to make a move, he'll see we're branching out and going after him all along the line."

"Lad," Andy grinned, "buying fur is a great game, isn't it?"

"Great!" Rod repeated impulsively, and then he laughed.

"Pretty near as good as the thing you wanted to do in New York, eh?" Andy persisted.

Rod hesitated as he caught the older man's quizzical and yet understanding glance.

"I was several sorts of a fool!" he suddenly exclaimed.

"Most of us are when we're young."

"I suppose so, but I've learned a queer thing, Andy. I've learned what inspiration is, and genius, too, I guess. You know, for years I thought I was born to be a writer. There was something inside of me that kept calling to get out. I used to have a bursting sort of feeling. It was physical, partly, it

was so strong. There were times when I thought I must write or explode, and of course it meant only one thing. Inspiration had come to me, and that, I believed, meant the prompting of genius. I used to soar — to revel in it!"

He broke off and laughed.

"When I came back to the bush it was like entering prison. I hated it. I thought I was being robbed of my rights. It took all the life out of me. Learning about dad — that was different. It still is — and I'll get Cron. But it isn't what waked me up entirely. Do you know —— ?"

For a moment he had become harsh and vindictive but again he stopped and grinned.

"Do you know what's happened in the last month, quite often?" he demanded. "There have been times when I felt exactly about the fur game as I used to about writing. I had the same emotions, that same bursting sensation, partly physical. I would make endless plans and I thought that if I couldn't put them into effect at once, I'd explode. I worked out details that seemed marvelous and" — again he laughed frankly — "I began to see myself as a genius in the fur trade, just as I used to dream of being a genius as a writer."

"Just ginger," Andy commented with a grin that managed somehow to be wholly sympathetic.

"And interest and enthusiasm."

"And being young."

"Yes, and having a hard proposition to buck.

We've licked The Spider only in our minds, remember. But it's supper time. You and George give the men their rations and I'll see that things are shipshape in the warehouse."

He walked briskly across the trade shop and out the door. George, who was busy behind the counter, watched him curiously and then turned to see Andy Parr come out of the office. Their eyes met for a moment and then Andy walked slowly forward.

"Funny thing about these Norwoods," he said casually. "There's no two of 'em alike and yet each time they seem to get better."

"You think he kill Ehe-bik?" George demanded eagerly.

"Kill him!" Andy repeated contemptuously. "No, Rod won't kill him. He's just going to pick him to pieces and cook him in hot tallow and use his hide for shoe leather and boil his bones to get grease to make the leather waterproof. No, Rod won't kill him. Killing's too good for the——"

Anger had suddenly possessed him and George Paul's eyes glowed with fierce delight as he listeened to the molten stream of weird expressions the old bushman extracted from the most unaccountable places as he went back through generation after generation of The Spider's ancestors and described each in detail.

"Kill him!" he concluded with a snort. "Keep your eye on Roddy."

14

Andy Parr fitted easily into the new circle at the supper table. Though he had spent nearly all his life in lonely places, he experienced no discomfort in the presence of strangers, while Professor Ransom gave him a peculiar interest in the visitors.

"So you've come to study the bow-and-arrows?" he asked with undisguised interest. "You must o' started early 'cause they've got a name for you already."

"A name!" the professor repeated in amazement. "How interesting! But why should they choose a name other than my own?"

"They always do," Beth laughed, "with every white man. They fasten it on some peculiarity they notice in their first meeting, and it always sticks. We all have names. Mine is Pee-kud-jik, though they never use it in my presence."

"What does it mean?" Marian asked.

"'Pile of mud'."

"How terrible!"

"Oh, it isn't so bad. It is because when I was two years old I went down to the lake and scraped up a heap of it. They call Rod 'Sucker-mouth'."

"You might explain why," Rod said when everyone laughed. "It seems that when I was a boy I used to pucker my lips like the fish they see so often."

"And may I inquire what they call me?" Professor Ransom asked so hesitantly everyone laughed.

"You got off easy," Beth told him. "Your name is Dee-bah-dji-mo-win-nin-i."

"It sounds terrible," Marian teased.

"But it isn't. It means 'Story-man,' because he is always asking for stories and writing them down."

"Have you heard Marian's?" Rod asked his sister.

"No. What is it?"

"They call her E-ndah-su-cha-kah-tay-gee-ji-ko-kwee."

"Horrors!" Marian cried. "Please don't tell me what that means?"

"It really shows the poetic nature of these people," Rod explained. "They had a desire to say something nice about Marian because they saw she was always smiling and cheerful. The name means 'Everywhere-shining-sky-woman'."

Marian blushed but Andy Parr's statement quickly diverted attention.

"They don't call Rod 'Sucker-mouth' any more," he said. "I heard a hunter say something like 'Day-tay-nee-sho-day' and George Paul said they meant Rod."

"But that means Father-twin!" Beth exclaimed.

"And that's what George says the hunters call Rod now, his father's twin."

"But he doesn't look the least bit like father!" Beth objected.

"Maybe they wasn't thinking of looks," Andy answered.

Beth glanced at her brother and saw the quick gleam of pleasure in his eyes.

"I imagine the natural cruelty of the primitive has determined their name for Mr. Cron," Professor Ransom remarked.

Marian looked up at Rod and saw his face harden. Andy, too, made no comment and became busy with his food. Beth alone seemed to be without hostility toward the rival trader.

"They call him Ehe-bik," the girl explained. "That's Ojibwa for spider. White people call him 'The Spider,' too."

"I don't see the significance," the professor said.

"You won't here at Lake Deception but at Mattawa, his home post, you would. The Indians mean that he has spun a web through the bush and that anyone who gets into it can't get out. He has the trade of a big district all to himself."

"You mean he did have!" Andy exclaimed indignantly.

"I'm sorry!" the girl laughed. "Rod told me how wonderfully you did at Black Sturgeon. You see," she explained to Marian and the professor, "father started a post in The Spider's territory

three or four years ago and Andy has been in charge of it."

The subject was dropped there. Neither Beth nor Professor Ransom seemed aware of the effect caused by the mention of The Spider's name but to Marian, who had watched Rod and had seen that blazing hatred come into his eyes, it brought back all the doubts and questions that had followed the strange scene on the portage.

"I have received some good news," said her father, interrupting her thoughts. "One of the Indians told me all the band will remain here for some time."

"Not when Rod gets busy to-morrow," Andy said. "I've tried to scatter them but they don't know me very well."

"The professor was in hopes they would stay a few weeks," Beth told him in that demure tone which always meant mischief. "It would give him such a wonderful opportunity to gather their folk-lore."

"And for them to eat a lot of flour and pork when they ought to be out in the bush earning their living," Andy retorted. "Rod can't afford to let 'em hang around."

"Why are they staying?" Beth asked.

"I'll have to find out," Rod answered. "They're probably trying me out. They want to learn if I am easy."

But the next morning he quickly unearthed an

entirely different explanation. An hour's questioning on his part, a little sleuthing by George Paul, and Rod made the startling discovery that the hunters were remaining at the post because The Spider had told them to. He had promised them something. What this was he was unable to learn, and he satisfied himself that the Indians themselves did not know.

"Not a pound of pork or flour to any of them," Rod told George Paul. "If they ask for it, call me."

Before noon he was summoned to the trade shop several times. Hunters wanted summer "debt," a thing Tom Norwood had never granted. One of the reasons for the prosperity and contentment of the Lake Deception Indians was this policy of refusing early allowances, preventing a burden of obligations that would discourage a hunter at the beginning of his winter's work.

In each case Rod offered the usual slight advance of necessities on condition the hunter would depart at once to a summer fishing camp but always this was refused.

"We'll settle this thing right here," Rod told Andy late in the afternoon. "Cron can't get back for a week and whatever he promised them won't hold long against an empty stomach."

Andy nodded approvingly but at supper time not an Indian had agreed to the terms. Yet the old trader found humor in the situation, when all except

Professor Ransom sat down for the evening meal.

Marian was embarrassed and tried to explain his absence. "I have to watch him every moment," she said. "He would never eat unless I led him to the table."

"He's taking his chance when he can," Andy laughed. "These Indians will be gone in a day or two. Rod started cracking the whip to-day."

The professor came in when the meal was nearly finished. He was apologetic but his enthusiasm cut his vague excuses short. He began to talk about the material he was gathering and several times he stopped eating to read from his note book.

"They are talking more freely than I thought they would," Rod said, "though I've tried to spread the word that you're perfectly all right."

"You're in luck there," Andy added. "Without Rod standing good for you they'd shut up like clams until they made up their own minds. It would have been a lot different if you had started in with The Spider."

"That reminds me!" Professor Ransom exclaimed. "A strange thing happened. I was sitting with several old men, listening to their stories, when suddenly they stopped talking. I became aware of considerable excitement. Everyone was looking toward the lake. The entire band gathered at the shore and it was with the greatest difficulty that I could get anyone to explain. At last someone told me that Mr. Cron had returned."

"Cron!" Rod cried. He shoved back his chair and leaped to his feet. "Did you see him?" he demanded of the professor.

"I saw a canoe with several men land in front of his post and a moment later I saw Mr. Cron himself."

Rod hurried to the kitchen.

"The Spider must have turned back the day you met him," Andy said to Beth in an undertone.

"But he didn't say that he would when we talked to him on Trout portage," she answered. "I introduced him to Professor Ransom and he apologized for not meeting them or not being at home when they arrived."

Marian, watching the two, was aware of a tenseness of manner. Rod's reactions, too, had perplexed her, for she could not understand why The Spider's arrival should be so disturbing.

"Perhaps he thought he should come back to take care of us," she suggested.

No one commented. Beth did not seem to have heard. Rod returned and took his place in silence. Beth and Andy looked at him inquiringly but neither spoke. More than ever before, Marian sensed the undercurrent of suspense.

When the meal was ended they went to the living room. Conversation of a sort was resumed but it was forced. Professor Ransom alone was natural. He was too intent on his notebook to notice the atmosphere of tension.

Presently George Paul burst into the room from the kitchen. He began at once to speak to Rod in Ojibwa. Beth and Andy listened closely. Marian, not understanding a word — nor did her father because of an accent the half-breed used — could only watch the faces of the others.

Suddenly she became aware that George was amused. She glanced quickly at Rod and found that he was smiling. Andy broke into a chuckle.

"You are going to have opposition, professor," Rod said. "Cron has imported a missionary."

"A missionary!" Marian repeated. "Why do you laugh?"

"It's the surprise he told the Indians to wait for. George has found out that he expected to meet the man in Heathcote and bring him in. That's really the reason he didn't meet you. He let you shift for yourselves."

"I don't understand," the girl said.

"It's this way," Rod explained. "The Spider induced a missionary to come here this summer. He was to meet him and bring him out. Probably he made the arrangements after he had agreed to meet you at a certain time. But the missionary arrived at Heathcote early and started out with two Indians the day after we left. He met Cron, who sent on his brigade and turned back at once."

"Still I don't understand what it all means," the girl protested.

"The Spider wants to hold these Indians here this

summer," Andy said. "He knew he couldn't do it himself so he hit on this idea of a missionary."

"But you can't object to religious efforts among the Indians."

"Not as strictly religious efforts," Rod answered. "This is only a ruse to hurt us. Besides, it's all so useless."

"You don't believe in Christianizing the Indians?" Professor Ransom asked. He leaned forward eagerly, fresh on the scent of new information.

"Frankly, I don't," Rod told him. "Most of all because it's so futile. These Indians have always been pagans and a missionary can't change them. Attempts have been made here and they have always failed."

"Then you think they will scoff at this missionary?"

"Oh, they'll listen to him, all right, though they'll laugh when they're alone."

"Then that is why you are not worrying about it," Marian said.

"I'm still worrying," Rod admitted. "As long as he stays, they'll stick. They'll have a great time, attending services and learning hymns."

"But they'll stay!" Beth broke into the discussion for the first time.

"They'll want to stay," Rod answered shortly. "You people will have to excuse me now."

Andy followed him from the room. Professor Ransom returned to his note books. Marian walked

to a window and looked across the bay at The Spider's post.

"I'm sorry, Beth," she said, "but we'll have to leave you now. It's been awfully kind of you to take care of us and I wish we could stay."

"Why don't you?" Beth demanded. "The Spider's house has only three rooms and his cook can't do anything except make bannock and boil potatoes and fish."

"I know, but we have made all the arrangements with him and it wouldn't be right. I don't see how we can escape from it. Father says Mr. Cron was very cordial when he met him on the portage."

"You want to remember that you will be in the camp of the enemy," Beth laughed.

"But that won't make any difference between us!" was Marian's quick protest. "There's no reason ——"

"And you'll be in The Spider's web," Beth interrupted. "They say that if anyone gets in he never gets out."

Marian caught the banter in the girl's eyes and smiled.

"I'm not afraid," she said, and Beth wondered at the note in her voice. "It may be rather fun to find out just what a spider in your north country can do."

15

"What you make of this missionary business, lad?" Andy asked as he and Rod walked across to the trade shop.

"Cron knows he can't hold these Indians here and he's getting someone else to do it," said Rod.

"But what's he aimin' to do?"

"Get them sore at me, for one thing. He's going to make trouble, Andy."

"Look here, now!" the old trader exclaimed. "Don't be takin' it that way. He can't do much."

"Can't!" Rod retorted. "The Spider's a better schemer than I gave him credit for. Here's what he's planned. The missionary will hold the Indians at the post. They'll have an emotional jag and no argument of mine will make them leave. They'll want 'debt'—flour and pork. They'll be too busy listening to the preacher to hunt and fish."

"You won't have to give it to them."

"Of course I will. If I don't Cron and the preacher will tell them I'm trying to starve them. You know how easy it is to get them discontented."

"Let them get 'debt' from Cron," Andy suggested. "Turn 'em down and they'll go to him and

this fall you can get 'em back easy enough. Then he'll be out what's been advanced."

"I'm willing to bet you that when Cron's brigade gets here in a few days there isn't a pound of pork or flour in it," Rod answered. "He'll tell the Indians he'd give it to them if he had it but that the stuff hasn't come. No, he's got us unless we can get rid of the preacher. To hold the good will of these hunters I've got to give them 'debt' as long as they stay here."

"I guess you're right," said Andy. "You've got to get rid of the preacher."

"And be careful how I do it. But that's my fight. Now that Cron's back you had better get those Black Sturgeon Indians of yours away. Can you start in the morning?"

"I'll get 'em lined up right now," and the trader started down the shore toward the wigwams that circled the head of the bay.

Rod went to the trade shop and for an hour he was busy sending George, Henry and an Indian he trusted to get what information they could from Cron's canoemen. Their reports confirmed his original estimate of The Spider's plans.

Andy returned and said he would be ready to start in the morning. For another hour he and Rod were busy going over the lists of trade goods and other supplies necessary to send out with the Black Sturgeon brigade and setting them aside in the warehouse. It was after nine o'clock before he returned to the

dwelling house, where he found Marian alone in the living room.

"I have been over to Mr. Cron's," she told him. "We will move to his house to-morrow."

Rod had known this would happen but he had not expected The Spider to return for a week and since Cron's sudden appearance with the missionary his mind had been wholly occupied with the new problem.

"I wish you wouldn't," he said shortly.

Marian caught the note of strained, savage rage in his voice.

"Why won't you be fair?" she demanded. "You ought to be above allowing a petty business prejudice to decide a personal matter."

"Petty business prejudice!" Rod repeated.

He stopped short. From the beginning the thought of Marian coming in any sort of contact with The Spider had been repugnant.

"It is only a business prejudice, isn't it?" she persisted. "Beth doesn't——"

"No, Beth doesn't——" he interrupted fiercely, and then turned quickly away.

His hatred of The Spider had brought him close to revealment of the thing he could not tell.

"And yet you ask me to make a personal decision solely on the grounds of a business rivalry, a competition your father was glad to——"

Rod's white face stopped her. The reference to his father had been almost unbearable but suddenly

to see himself as he appeared to her, to realize that her heart permitted him to play such a role, was worse.

"I beg your pardon," he said coldly. "As you have said, it is none of my business. I'll have a canoe ready in the morning to take you and your things across the bay."

"But Rod!" Marian cried in sudden protest. "This is all so foolish. There is no need ——"

She came slowly forward, mystified, bewildered. She had been certain that this was only a puerile, petty hatred but now as he stood there she was aware of strength and also of a purpose that barred her from him. Again, and it perplexed her still more, she experienced that thrill in his presence and instinctively she reached forth her hands.

To Rod that gesture was revealing. It told that she had again become the girl of the canoe. He forgot The Spider, forgot everything except her loveliness, grasped her hands and drew her to him.

Marian struggled, but with her eyes and her mind rather than her body. Physically she was powerless in his grasp but resistance flashed in her blue eyes.

It maddened Rod. More than anything else he wanted to break down that hidden but rigid framework and the challenging spirit he had sensed — a spirit which was denying him, denying the existence of a relationship she had once acknowledged.

He crushed her to him and kissed her again and again. For a moment there was a passionate response

and then with sudden energy Marian pushed herself away.

"Don't!" she commanded. "You had no right!"

"No right!" he repeated. "After that day in the canoe!"

"I asked you to forget that it had ever happened."

"I won't, and you can't. You have just showed that you can't."

The fact that she must acknowledge the truth of his statement to herself only drove her to a more vehement denial.

"A mistake should be forgotten. It — it meant nothing."

"It meant everything," he answered. "It is the greatest thing in the world — what happened to us. You knew it that day. I had a glimpse of it the first time I saw you, there in the hotel at Heathcote."

Rod stepped forward and took one of Marian's hands in his own.

"You are the most glorious person I ever saw," he rushed on. "I loved you from the first. And you love me, only you won't admit it."

"I don't! I don't!" she interrupted fiercely. "I don't even know you."

"But you did. You acknowledged it. You were braver then."

He was beseeching the other Marian, the girl who had sat beside him for so many hours on the way out to Lake Deception.

"Don't put it aside," he pleaded. "It was too big. Nothing else counts."

"But it does! It has to!" For a moment she struggled to phrase incoherent thoughts — then stiffened. Her confused spirit sought protection behind an inflexible denial. "And because it counts so terribly I know it was pure madness," she finished coldly.

Rod stared for a moment in bewilderment. Her head was high. He had caught a trace of contempt in her voice and there was unmistakable defiance in her bearing.

"All right!" he exclaimed savagely. "Call it madness. But before I'm through you'll call it something else."

He strode from the room but at the door he stopped and looked back. Marian still stood at the window, tall, straight, more beautiful than he had ever seen her, and infinitely more desirable.

Yet above all else he was impressed by the challenge of her aloofness, by a defiance that incited him to a mad longing for dominance. She was like a wild creature, inflamed by the least suggestion of restraint.

That moment in the canoe, he now knew, had been real, an acknowledgment. His jesting reference to atavism became an answer to his bewilderment. Marian's strange mingling of surrender and revolt, of tenderness and scorn, were no longer inexplicable.

Rod smiled. He raised his left hand and with

his right he slowly turned down three fingers, one after the other, counting to himself, "Me, The Spider, heart's desire."

"What are you doing?" she demanded indignantly.

"Outlining the summer's work," he replied with all cheerfulness. "When would you like to start in the morning? Any time after breakfast do?"

"Perfectly."

"All right. I'll have George or Henry take you over. You will visit Beth occasionally?"

She turned her back without reply and Rod leaped across the room to her side.

"You're coming back," he whispered, "because you'll want to."

But the next morning at breakfast he found it hard to maintain that careless, cheerful attitude. Only a healthy body had permitted him to sleep, for after he had gone to bed he was stunned by the very audacity of his course and by what, in the dark, seemed the utter impossibility of compelling Marian's love against all the forces that denied it.

It had once been his. Of that he had no doubt. The moment of revealment remained startlingly vivid and gave him courage — that and the manner in which he had caught her studying him at the breakfast table.

But once the Ransoms had departed for the Cron establishment Rod had little time for retrospection. Coincident with his final talk with Andy Parr some-

thing happened across the bay. A number of Indians had gathered there and soon he saw a huge tent being erected not far from The Spider's trade shop.

"The preacher isn't losing any time," Andy said as he stepped into his canoe. "Looks like he intended to stay awhile, lad."

"Don't worry," Rod retorted. "I'll give him a week."

In the next few days things worked out exactly as Rod has expected. Not a hunter departed. Between gospel meetings afternoon and evening and a morning school for the children, the Indians were given their fill of religious services. The second day the preacher called on Rod.

"My name is Sharman," he introduced himself when he entered the trade shop and found the young trader behind the counter, "the Reverend Harold Sharman. I am sorry that I could not call sooner but I have been busy, as you have doubtless noticed, getting ready for the summer's activities."

"Summer!" Rod repeated bluntly. "Do you mean you intend to stay here all summer?"

"It was my hope and now, after the reception I have been accorded by the Indians, it is my confident expectation."

He was a tall man, a little lean and a little stooped. His face was sharp, his eyes were a thin blue and of peculiar intentness. His words had been uttered as if each were being selected and carefully examined before passing his lips and as he stood

there in the middle of the room, his hands clasped at his waist, Rod received the distinct impression of a pose.

"It is also my hope," he continued when the young trader did not speak, "that I may have your hearty co-operation in my efforts to reclaim these souls from sin. No," and he held up one hand, "I have stated that poorly. It is not a hope. I know that you, as the most influential white man in this part of the wilderness, will be glad to lend what assistance you can."

"Just what sort of assistance do you think I might give you?"

"Perhaps assistance is not the word," Sharman replied unctuously. "To be sure, I would like to have you attend the meetings, give them the sanction of your presence, but most of all you can be of service to the Master by making it possible for my flock to remain at the post during the summer."

"I suppose that Cron will coöperate in that?" Rod asked.

"Mr. Cron has been most generous and helpful and he has promised to do all that he can."

Rod closed the Indian book, which lay open on the counter, returned it slowly to its place on a shelf and carefully arranged the pen and ink beside it.

"Perhaps," he began suddenly, "you've heard the Norwood post has been here for a good many years, that most of these Indians have never traded with anyone except a Norwood?"

The Reverend Mr. Sharman stared and his pale eyes narrowed.

"If you haven't heard it, it's true," Rod rushed on. "They're our Indians, these hunters — always have been. And that doesn't mean we try to hold them down, keep them ignorant or poor. We want them to prosper and to be happy and contented."

"Then surely you will be glad to assist me!" the preacher exclaimed.

"My father didn't believe in missionary work among the Indians," Rod continued as if Sharman had not spoken. "It wasn't that he didn't believe in religion. He just had the idea that it wasn't what the Indians needed."

"But my dear Mr. Norwood!" Sharman cried in protest.

"Wait!" and Rod held up a hand. "That's what my father believed. I think he was wrong. I should like to see these people forsake their pagan existence. I should like to see them taught that their superstitions are wrong."

"Then you mean that you are willing to assist me?" Sharman demanded eagerly.

"Of course. I'm glad you're here. Ever since the hunters came this spring I have thought a great deal about their condition, their spiritual state. Now just what can I do to help things along?"

"Why, Mr. Norwood —" Sharman began impetuously, and his thin face expressed surprise rather than gratification.

"Come in here," Rod said as he led the way to the office.

He placed a chair for his caller and sat down with his back to the desk.

"Tell me how long you intend to stay and what you hope to accomplish!" he exclaimed encouragingly.

Sharman plunged into a description of his plans. His speech was no less oily but the oil had thinned, flowed more rapidly, and his project grew with each enthusiastic nod or word of approval from Rod.

But as he talked on Rod saw that the man's gaze often wandered to the desk. For a while the young trader could not understand and then he remembered that he had left a bottle of Scotch there after a farewell toast with Andy to the success of the Black Sturgeon post.

At last he turned casually and looked at the bottle.

"If you were anyone but a missionary I would have offered the usual hospitality of the north," he laughed as he set the whisky in a corner.

Sharman held up a hand in protest but his thin lips parted as he moistened them with an unconscious movement of his tongue and his eyes lighted greedily for an instant.

Rod asked more questions as to the missionary's experience among Indians, his denomination and backing, displaying always an eager interest in the work. It was an hour before Sharman finally departed with the explanation that he must hurry to his morning school for children.

A few minutes afterward a hunter entered with a plea for summer "debt." Rod granted it readily, issuing a small quantity of flour and pork, and half an hour later every hunter in the encampment knew it.

In the days that followed the young trader was kept busy. He had learned definitely that Cron's shop was empty of supplies and there fell to him the task of providing food for more than three hundred Indians. At last when The Spider's brigade arrived from Heathcote the boxes and bales carried up the bank showed that his first suspicions had been correct. No flour or pork had been brought in.

Meanwhile Professor Ransom had been filling his notebooks with myths and folklore. Several of the older Indians had refused to attend the missionary's services and from these the anthropologist reaped a rich harvest.

Marian and Beth, with no duties, were together every day. Rod saw Marian often but his attitude toward her differed in no way from his attitude toward Beth. He made no effort to see her alone or even to spend much time with the two girls. He always had the excuse of a hungry Indian waiting in the trade shop.

But he did not find this easy. The girl's beauty was maddening. Her allure increased tremendously as her spirit seemed to recede from him. Only that sense of challenge, of defiance — something not expressed in any one thing she did, not in any glance,

any curl of her lips, any toss of her head, and yet conveyed so positively — only this enabled him to laugh in her presence and to carry himself with a certain nonchalance.

Marian quickly fell into accord with Rod's attitude. Whenever she came to the Norwood post, which was every day, for she had learned to paddle a canoe alone, she was to all appearances the same girl he had first seen at Heathcote. Beth adored her, was constantly with her, and when she had gone back to The Spider's post the sister recounted her virtues and charms to the brother. And Rod pondered his problem alone.

16

Marian Ransom's introduction to The Spider's household was also her introduction to Aaron Cron himself. Since that day she had stepped into the brush to avoid meeting him on Trout portage her first pity for the man had grown. But before she had been in his home a day that pity changed to admiration. Like everyone else with whom he came in contact, she forgot that he was legless.

In the first day The Spider had said little. As always, he sat on his bunk, his great head resting between his high, thick shoulders, his dark eyes staring intently from beneath the heavy brows. Only his eyes had changed when he saw Marian, a glow flickering for a moment far back in the dark depths.

After that he stared silently whenever the girl entered the room. Several times she tried to draw him into conversation but was rewarded only by his usual "Huh!" It was not until the second morning that he showed an inclination to speak.

"What good's it going to be, all this work your father's doing?" he asked bluntly.

"It's of great scientific interest," she replied, her

academic viewpoint shocked by this questioning of ethnological research.

"Interest, eh? Maybe. But what use is it?"

"It is work that has never been done. It adds to our knowledge of primitive people, and indirectly to knowledge of ourselves."

"You mean we can learn something about white people by listening to a lot of old bow-and-arrows telling yarns?"

"Father could easily convince you that is true."

"Huh!" The Spider snorted. "What you come along for?"

"To look after father," Marian laughed. "That's one reason. The other is that I wanted to."

She was animated now and strangely at ease with this man. For the first time her charm had made an impression upon him, a fact she recognized and responded to.

"Do you know," he said abruptly, "you're the first white woman that's ever been in my house, or ever talked to me."

"The first!" she repeated in amazement.

"Yes, the first. I don't know why it is — guess it's my not having any legs — but I got a bad name in the bush. Men as well as women. I don't know why. They all keep away from me."

"But surely it is because you live alone so much!" Marian protested quickly. "You see so few ——"

"Oh, I get out enough," he interrupted. "And it's the same there. You'd think I had the smallpox."

"I know that must be your imagination. Why, Beth — Miss Norwood — she doesn't ——"

"Norwood!" he sneered. "Old Tom came over here and laughed and talked and pretended to be friendly and all the time he was doing things no decent man would do. I don't mind a fight for fur, a straight out-and-out fight, but his ways — Huh!"

"I am sure you must be mistaken," Marian said. "Beth has never indicated to me in any way that ——"

"Of course. She doesn't know. The Norwoods always keep things from their women. And it's well they do. Tom's wife was a fine woman, from all I've heard, and the girl is, too. But the men!"

He broke off with a grunt and eyed Marian silently for a moment.

"Guess it's not the thing for me to say, and I ain't really got any kick coming. I've held my own if they did do things a half-breed would be ashamed of. Only I wish Tom Norwood had lived a little longer. For all his dirty tricks, I'd 'a licked him."

"You mean," Marian asked hesitantly, "that he did things that were — were criminal?"

"There's crimes and there's crimes, miss," The Spider said. "There's some things we do in buying fur that ain't considered right outside, but there's a line few steps over. Tom Norwood was one that did. Twice he's wrecked my brigade, sunk my trade goods in the lakes, and once he stole half my fur.

That's the way he played the game but if I'd had two legs to stand on, he'd never'd 'a tried it."

Marian made no comment. She drew back, silent and stunned.

"But that time's past," The Spider continued. "My turn's come."

"You mean," she asked breathlessly, "that you are going to do what — what he did?"

"Huh!" he snorted. "Think I'd be telling you if I was? Besides, I'm not that sort. I've learned to wait, sitting on a bunk like this for the last twenty-five years. A man learns a lot sitting still all the time. He may not see so much or do so much but he gets time for thinking and studying things out. No, I'm going to smash the Norwoods now because I've waited until I could do it square."

"By what you call straight trading?" Marian asked in relief.

"Yes, straight trading, with the usual tricks that's been played ever since the first white man bought a pelt. That and because the Norwoods has petered out."

"Petered out!" she repeated in bewilderment.

"Yes, petered out. It's going to be easy for me now with that young squirt running things across the bay. He ain't a quarter the man his dad was. He ain't got the guts."

"That's not fair!" Marian exclaimed. "Rod doesn't pretend to be a trader. He's gone into a fight he'd never chose except ——"

"So!" and The Spider stared intently at her until her eyes fell. "And you ain't known him but a few days."

"You're mistaken, utterly!" she cried.

Again she was subjected to that steady, searching stare but this time her eyes did not fall. Marian Ransom's beauty was striking when she was in repose. Her coloring, the deep, heavy blue of the eyes circled by the thick, dark lashes, the stray, crinkling strands of hair about her face, would al-arrest attention. When her interest or sympathies were aroused there was a warmth and a tenderness that added to her charm. But when she was angry, when her head was high and her slim, straight body erect, she became superb — a curious blending of the pride of an intellectual aristocracy and the unquelled spirit of a wild creature.

It was thus that Aaron Cron saw her now and it was with her flaming mood that his own adamantine spirit clashed. And it was his expression that first changed. A slow grin spread over his face.

"I guess I did make a mistake," he said. "You're not partial to cubs."

"I don't know what you mean!" she retorted, and suddenly she was amazed that she should be quarreling, as she saw it, with this man.

"No," he answered slowly, "I guess you wouldn't — yet." And then with that disconcerting suddenness with which he changed a subject, he added, "You feel sorry for me, don't you?"

"No," she answered. "I did at first. Now——"

"Why not?"

"You don't need sympathy!" she exclaimed warmly. "I have wondered what——"

"I looked like, eh? I was six foot two. I've packed two hundred pounds all day. No Indian, and they're born with a packstrap on their heads, could do it."

There could have been no more disinterested statement of fact. Nor was there a tinge of regret or complaint. The man's spirit seemed like his body, huge, unshakable.

Here, Marian thought, was a nature such as she had expected to find in the north, a man who had absorbed the stern qualities of the wilderness, whose soul had been touched by struggle and solitude and extreme peril but had emerged unshaken and unbruised.

Though never in her life had she come so close to uncouthness, Marian was unaware of it here. To her The Spider remained elemental, a massive bust of dominance that compelled admiration through sheer, crude strength.

It was out of this impression that a strange relationship developed. She was attracted by the very quality in the man that she defied. Her own spirit flared at his blunt assumption of power. She experienced the thrill of conflict in meeting his steady stare. She found a peculiar delight in a clash of minds.

It was inevitable, because of Aaron Cron's limited experience and interests, that there should be many references to the Norwoods.

"How do you like the preacher?" he demanded one day.

"He seems tireless," Marian answered.

"Huh!" The Spider grunted, and for an instant a queer gleam replaced his steady stare. "Damn foolishness."

"Not if you have faith, if you believe."

"A man's a fool to have faith in anyone but himself," he retorted. "Or believe in anyone else."

He studied her closely for a moment.

"That's what got me where I am," he continued savagely. "Believing I'd win, legs or no legs. That's why I'm going to see the end of the Norwoods on Lake Deception in spite of Tom and all his deviltry."

A strange, recurring sense of loyalty to Rod, as incomprehensible to the girl as many of her fervid emotions, stung her to instant response.

"You haven't won yet," she taunted.

"Do you know what takes the sap out of a man quickest?" he demanded. "It's hate — hate and fear. Since he was a boy Roddy's been afraid of me. I could tell it easy. His eyes. Now, when he's a man, he's ashamed of it. And because he is, he hates me. A man can't fight when he carries that on his back."

She did not comment, for she remembered that

meeting on Trout portage. Cron must have seen the doubt in her eyes for he laughed harshly.

"You know it. You're the kind that sees things. Roddy'll try. I'm not expecting too much of his hating me. But I'm expecting he'll be like his dad. He'll turn tricky, do anything to win, which will only make it last a little longer."

Marian was too troubled to see a quick gleam in his eyes when she remained silent. Her first estimate of the man, formed largely by her emotional reactions, blinded her to the motives or subtlety in his baiting, and again her sense of loyalty, an instinctive defense of that moment in the canoe, drove her to denial. But this time she strove to keep all vehemence from her voice.

"I won't believe that of Rod," she said.

"Huh!" The Spider snorted.

But Cron's was not the only personality that was having an effect on Marian. Three times each day she sat at meals beside Harold Sharman. At first he touched only the edges of her mind. He was too colorless to impress her emotions until, when they met outside the door one morning, he bowed with an ease and grace that in themselves were startling and said:

"'I am right glad to catch this good occasion'."

Marian started but forced a quick smile.

"That is not Scripture," she retorted.

"Nor is there anything in Scripture to forbid homage to beauty," he answered. "Please do not

mistake me," as Marian's eyes chilled, "only it has been upon my mind that I have a duty. We men of the wilderness see so much that is ugly and rough it is only right that I should express for myself and my fellows the joy your presence has given us."

"That is a pretty speech," and Marian blushed more for the man than for herself. There was something so humble about him her pity was aroused, but she could not refrain from banter. "I don't wonder the Indians flock to hear you if you are so subtle."

"It is not subtlety but sincerity, in both instances," he said with a shade of reproof.

"I am sorry!" the girl exclaimed. "I am sure it is sincerity. And you are succeeding with the Indians, aren't you?"

"I hope that I am. Everyone has been so helpful, Mr. Cron and the other trader, Mr. Norwood."

"Mr. Norwood!" Marian repeated. "Has he been helping, too?"

"With his influence, which, because of his family's long sojourn here, is great. I was much encouraged by my talk with him. A fine young man is Mr. Norwood, in 'His May of youth, and bloom of lustihood'."

Thereafter Marian was far more conscious of the Reverend Mr. Sharman. At meals he seldom talked but she often caught him watching her with frank adoration in his eyes, an adoration that was humble and unafraid.

But on the few occasions when he saw her alone he was voluble, frank in his praise and yet curiously diffident. Sometimes at the table she caught a moody, depressed expression in his eyes. Again an entire day passed when he was nervous and, if Cron spoke to him, irritable.

"I feel so sorry for him," Marian confided to Beth. "I haven't heard him preach to the Indians but he must be a success there. Yet he always impresses me as being weak."

"These missionaries often are," Beth said indifferently. "It's really an easy job."

"What a terrible thing to say! Mr. Sharman really works very hard, and he gets so tired. Last night at supper he seemed exhausted."

"But not too much so to quote Shakespeare," said Beth with a smile.

"No," Marian laughed. "He seems to know every play."

"Who's the Shakespeare scholar?" Rod asked as he entered the room hurriedly and searched in a bookcase for a bottle of ink. "Beth, have you been robbing the office again?"

"It's on the upper shelf. Marian says the missionary knows Shakespeare better than he does the Bible. Quotes him continually to her."

Rod whirled and looked at the two girls.

"He does, eh? With considerable fervor, I presume?"

"Very beautifully," Marian said. "He really has

a wonderful voice, but that is to be expected of a preacher, I suppose."

She became conscious that Rod's stare was most intent, and then he suddenly flung himself into a chair as if in relief.

"Yes, I suppose so," he said. "Between the preacher and The Spider, you must find it interesting across the bay."

"I do," she retorted. "Mr. Cron is a most unusual man."

"I dare say," Rod answered easily, and she saw that for the first time he did not stiffen at mention of his rival. "Both are entirely different types than you expected to find in the bush, aren't they?"

"Not disappointingly so. In fact, I am going to miss Mr. Cron very much."

"Miss him!" Rod repeated. "Are you and your father planning to leave soon?"

"Not while the Indians remain."

"Oh!" and now Rod was sitting on the edge of his chair, tensely alert. "Then your host has deserted you again?"

"He must have received a message late last night," Marian explained. "This morning he did not appear. He left word that he had gone to his other post. Mattawa, is it?"

For a moment Rod remained on the edge of his chair and then he threw himself back and laughed.

"You know Nee-bau-bee-nis, Beth," he said. "You saw him, Marian. Head guide of the brigade. He

came into the shop this afternoon with that Stetson hat he bought three days ago and asked to exchange it for a cheaper one. It was badly soiled but I let him. The poor devil didn't dare go back home with the Stetson."

Beth laughed but Marian looked from one to the other in bewilderment.

"You think of a squaw as a down-trodden slave," Rod explained. "You should see these Ojibwa women in action. I knew this was coming. His wife didn't want him to buy the Stetson. Raised Ned when he selected it. You must have heard her across the bay. There's something for your father to jot down."

"You mean she wouldn't let him keep the hat he wanted?" Marian laughed.

"Exactly. And he had his heart set on it, like a small boy. You'll have a hard time making your friends believe that when you return to Massachusetts. But I've got to get back to the shop. Bo' jou'," and he hastened out of the room.

Marian suddenly became aware that Beth was tense in her chair and that something had happened of which she was unconscious.

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Marian remained at the Norwood post for supper that night but immediately after the meal Rod excused himself and went over to the trade shop. George Paul was there waiting for him.

"Who went with him?" Rod asked.

"Bapinini."

"Mattawa?"

"That's what they say."

"What time does the preacher start his evening services?"

"Pretty quick now."

"Now listen, George. Tell Henry to be ready to start to Heathcote to-night. Get hold of young Nee-bau-bee-nis to go with him. Henry may have trouble but make him understand that no matter what happens he's to go through."

"He take letter?" the half-breed asked.

"May be, but keep it quiet. They won't start until after dark."

"Say, what you going to do about these hunters?" George demanded. "They no hunt, they no fish. Your father never let them stay around post like

this. Pretty soon they have so much 'debt' they can't pay."

"What do you think dad would have done?" Rod asked.

"He tell them to go away — they go," was the positive answer.

Rod did not reply. He went out the door and, to George's amazement, down to the shore and paddled across the bay to The Spider's post. Only he did not stop at the trade shop or dwelling house but went on past to the big gospel tent in which the Indians were beginning to gather for the evening services. There he sat down at the rear, unobserved by the Reverend Mr. Sharman, who was tinkering with a small portable organ. In a few minutes the tent was packed and the services began.

Rod grinned when he saw Jim, the tall half-breed, stand up beside the preacher. Sharman announced a hymn, in English, and Jim interpreted. Then the missionary sat down at the organ and played and sang it.

A prayer followed. The impassioned words, delivered by a beautiful voice, had an effect upon the Indians despite the pauses in which the half-breed, bored, surly and omitting entire passages, conveyed something of the thought in Ojibwa. There was another hymn and then the sermon.

Rod himself was moved by the beauty of Sharman's voice and yet he saw at once that the man was not an orator, exhorting and driven by emotion, but

a marvelous reader, one as skilled in the use of his voice as a master violinist with the bow. The Indians responded to it, were swayed for the moment, for they love resonant words, and even Jim's mumbled and sketchy interpretation failed to lessen their absorption. They were thrilled, not by a religious excitement, but wholly by the mellifluous cadence of seductive tones.

When the Indians rose for the last hymn Rod slipped outside. The sun had set and the long northern twilight was fading. He looked at his watch, glanced across the bay and then walked down to his canoe.

The bank was high in front of Cron's post and he could not be seen from the door of the dwelling house. He waited there, listening, until he knew Sharman had returned, Then he climbed the bank and walked quickly to The Spider's home.

It was the first time Rod had entered it since that day more than ten years before when he had accompanied his father on a "neighborly" call, since that winter afternoon when he had first seen Aaron Cron on the banks of Drowning River and had recognized the man's indomitable will.

But he was not thinking of these things now. He strode briskly to the door, knocked, and was admitted by Sharman himself. As he entered he saw Jim, the tall half-breed, pass hurriedly into the kitchen.

"This is indeed a pleasure!" the missionary ex-

claimed. "I have been hoping that you would attend our services."

"I have done so," Rod answered. "I was there this evening."

Sharman beamed and drew forth a chair.

"You denied me the joy that knowledge of your presence would have given," he said. "Won't you be seated?"

"No," was the curt answer. "I have come to say good-bye."

"You are not leaving?"

"You are. For Heathcote — after dark."

"But my dear Mr. Norwood! Surely you ——"

"Never mind!" Rod interrupted. "I have no way of proving you are a fake, but it makes no difference. I suspect you're an actor out of a job. You have all the earmarks. But whether you're an actor or a real preacher, the fact remains that you're The Spider's dupe, playing his game. Now the game's up."

Sharman's long, thin body straightened and he conveyed a striking impression of injured dignity and amazement.

"Do you realize that you insult your God?" he thundered.

"You insult my common sense," Rod replied coolly. "You know Shakespeare far better than you know the Bible. You have a voice that could have been trained nowhere except on the stage and I have a strong hunch that you suffer considerably

because your present occupation doesn't permit the usual allowance of Scotch."

"This — this is insufferable!" Sharman cried.

"Perhaps," Rod answered indifferently. "I may be wrong about all this but it doesn't make any difference. Fake or not, I would act the same. You're The Spider's dupe. You were brought here to keep the Indians around the post when they should be out earning their living. They're running heavily into debt to me. You'll notice Cron had no supplies for them, though they were in the station at Heathcote. He is trying to ruin me commercially and he's using you to do it, whether you know it or not. That's why you start to-night for the railroad."

Sharman relaxed from his tense attitude and laughed.

"I did not realize that I was dealing with a beardless youth," he said. "For a moment your preposterously insolent behavior startled me. Oh, Jim!" and he raised his voice, "Will you please remove this person from the house?"

The tall half-breed must have been listening at the door for he entered instantly and started across the room toward Rod.

"Get back there!" the young trader warned, as he drew a revolver from beneath his coat.

The half-breed hesitated and glanced at Sharman.

"Hurry up!" Rod snapped, and Jim turned and walked out.

"Now," Rod continued, and he pointed the re-

volver at Sharman, "get your things together and be quick about it."

Sharman stared. He moistened his lips. His pale blue eyes were fixed on the weapon.

"Very well," he said huskily. "But I do so protesting against this outrage. I go because you force me to but this is by no means the end of the affair. I will report this to the mission board and to the authorities at once."

"All right," Rod answered, and again his tone was indifferent. "The Indians will be gone by that time and that's all I care about. Get your stuff together."

Sharman, who had been sleeping in the main room, turned to a corner and began to pack a small valise. Rod saw Jim's shadow at the kitchen door and watched closely but the half-breed did not enter.

"Come on," Rod said, when Sharman turned with his luggage in his hand.

Rod opened the door, let Sharman precede him and then slipped out backward, watching the kitchen. Then, with one hand guiding the missionary in the half darkness, he hurried down the bank to the waiting canoe. As he reached it a birchbark slid up beside his craft and Marian, returning from her visit with Beth, stepped ashore.

"Hello," Rod said. And then, to his prisoner, "Get in here, Sharman."

"Miss Ransom!" the preacher cried. "I call upon you to witness this outrage. I am being

forcibly ejected from Mr. Cron's home, from my work, from the country, by this person."

The man's voice ran the scale and Rod laughed.

"You must be joking!" Marian cried, and she stepped closer in the darkness.

"No joke at all," Rod assured her. "He's telling the truth."

"Rod! Surely you aren't going to do this?"

"I certainly am."

"But you can't! I won't allow it, not while Mr. Cron is absent."

"You don't understand, Marian."

"But I do! I can see how contemptible it is. Go back to the house, Mr. Sharman."

The preacher turned quickly but Rod leaped in front of him.

"Get into that canoe and be quick about it!" he exclaimed savagely, holding the revolver against the man's stomach. And to Marian, "Keep out of this. It's a matter between Cron and me."

"It is not!" she retorted. "You brought me into it. You took advantage of my remark about Mr. Cron leaving. I remember now how you acted. I was a guest in your house but that meant nothing. It's all a part of your spying, treacherous ——"

Her voice broke.

"Get into that canoe," Rod commanded when Sharman again hesitated.

He followed the man with the revolver until he had obeyed, then took hold of the stern to shove off.

Before he could lift it, Marian sprang forward, confronting him with hands outstretched.

"Rod, think what you are doing." She was pleading now. "There is still time to give it up, to fight fairly."

He felt his own wrath wavering without the spur of her defiance.

"Please," she whispered.

"But you don't know what is ——"

"Know!" she cried. "I know too much. I'm not a Norwood woman from whom such things are kept. I know you haven't the courage to do things openly, that even against a man whose faith forbids him to fight and another who is crippled, you have to evade one and attack the other in the dark. I know that you are like a spoiled child, hating a man without legs, striking when his back is turned. Oh, and to think that I ——"

"Marian," Rod said quietly when she broke off, "you are making a mistake."

"My mistake was made that day in the canoe," she retorted furiously. "To have thought I —— Oh, you coward!"

He could not see her distinctly in the darkness but he knew how beautiful, how glorious, she must be in her wrath. He desired her then as he never had before, and as never before he saw what he must do to win her.

"All right," he laughed. "We'll let it go at that — for the present."

He shoved off the canoe, leaped in and paddled away.

"I think," Sharman commented when they were in the middle of the bay, "that Miss Ransom has left me very little to say. She described you quite accurately."

"That was an unfortunate speech," Rod replied. "I was just going to ask if Cron has paid you anything for your services."

"I will not listen to more of your insinuations."

"I had it in mind to add," Rod continued imperturbably, "that if he has paid you nothing I might advance fifty dollars, as a loan, you understand. It would get you to Winnipeg and keep you until you heard from The Spider."

He stopped paddling, drew a small roll of bills from a pocket and handed them to Sharman. They were accepted without comment.

"I noticed," Rod continued as he resumed paddling, "that your grip was not quite full. There is room for a couple of bottles of Scotch, I am sure. I would advise you, however, not to let the canoemen know you have it."

Again there was silence in the bow of the canoe and Rod paddled on until he landed at the Norwood dock. George Paul was waiting.

"The boys ready?" Rod asked. "The missionary has been called away suddenly and I know they will be willing to take him along. Get them started."

George whistled and two figures appeared out of

the shadow of the bank. Rod spoke rapidly in Ojibwa and they set a canoe in the water. Rod called George Paul aside and whispered to him. The half-breed hurried up the bank. In a few minutes he returned with a package which Rod placed in the missionary's valise.

"A pleasant journey," he said as he set the luggage in the canoe.

Sharman started to follow and then hesitated. He turned at last and thrust out his hand to Rod.

"'I thank thee for thine honest care'," he quoted.

"'I must be cruel only to be kind,' eh?" Rod laughed. "At least, we now understand each other."

"Sufficiently, sir. Good-bye, and good luck. That man is a beast."

"Quite."

"And the young lady. I think I understand. 'If we be conquered, let men conquer us'."

"Good-bye," Rod said.

He went to the dwelling house and told Beth what had happened, even to a sketch of Marian's attitude and remarks.

"But Rod!" she cried, "I can't understand why."

She arose to her feet, her eyes flashing. "That certainly was a nice way to talk, after all we've done for them. It's not her affair. What right had she to meddle?"

"She thought she had a right," Rod answered. "But in any event, Cron's checkmated. I'll get those hunters away to-morrow."

"I knew you'd do it. You had to. But Marian! I can't understand her. Rod, you haven't — you and she —— Has there been anything?"

"I said she thought she had a right. She was sincere enough. I only told you so that you would understand if she is different. Don't say anything to her about it, and don't tell her the missionary was a fake."

He looked at her steadily as he spoke. She hesitated a moment, then nodded.

"All right, but she ought to have known you wouldn't do anything that wasn't right."

Rod laughed. "You'd know, wouldn't you, Betsy? Right or wrong, you're for me. But you've known me longer."

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The next morning there was some murmuring among the Indians when they learned the missionary had gone. Jim told them how Rod had driven him out with a gun but Rod laughed when they repeated the story to him.

"If I did a thing like that he would have the police in here in a week," he said. "I'm not a fool. The Spider's man is only trying to make you angry with me. No, the missionary wanted to go. He was worrying about a sick child he had left at home. I only provided a canoe and two men to take him out."

Rod's explanation was believed, largely because he was a Norwood. The birchbark wigwams were rolled up and canoe after canoe departed. Two days later only the half dozen men Rod had hired to cut the winter's wood, and their families, remained. The Spider's ruse had failed completely.

Marian did not appear at the Norwood post, though she and Beth had been together every day since their arrival. Neither Rod nor his sister made an attempt to see her, nor was she mentioned. Then,

at the end of the third day after Sharman's departure, The Spider returned.

Rod saw him paddle up to the post with Bapinini, "The Laughing Man," saw Jim meet him at the bank. They talked for a few minutes and then he saw The Spider thrust against the bank with his paddle, shoving the canoe far out. Bapinini turned the craft and it fairly leaped from the water as it came across the bay toward the Norwood establishment.

The moment The Spider's head appeared above the bank and he started across the grass toward the door of the Norwood trade shop, Rod understood that here was a man entirely different from the one who had come to see him a few months before.

Then Cron's every physical movement expressed a cold, unshakable purpose. In the forward thrusts of his thick body there had been a relentlessness, a grim determination, a refusal to acknowledge any handicap. Now there was no mistaking the savage rage that spurred him forward with amazing rapidity.

To the young trader it was a sign of victory, an indication that Cron was weakening. He was no longer capable of biding his time. Though he knew he would face his father's slayer, Rod looked forward to the moment with a certain zest and wholly without the passion which had engulfed him in their meeting on Trout portage.

As he walked behind the counter the door was thrust open so violently it crashed against the log

wall. With two swings of his powerful arms, The Spider reached the center of the room and paused there, glaring up at Rod.

"You've asked for it, now you're going to get it!" he bellowed. "You can't come into my house with a gun and threaten my men or drive away my friends."

He was almost incoherent in his rage and his heavy, dark face was distorted by fury, and yet Rod found him far less formidable than when in the cold, intent, unshakable aspect to which he had been accustomed.

"Oh!" Rod exclaimed. "Then he fooled you, too, did he?"

"Who fooled me?" Cron demanded, his fury cooling as he noted Rod's coolness.

"The actor. The man who posed as a missionary. But of course you would never suspect him."

The Spider stared at Rod for a moment.

"Huh!" he grunted. "He talked, did he?"

Rod laughed, even though amazed at Cron's ready acknowledgment.

"Just as you have now," he answered. "When he couldn't do anything else."

"Let that go!" The Spider said harshly. "You came into my house with a gun and offered to use it on one of my men. That's different. You started something you'll soon see the end of."

"Possibly," Rod agreed.

He found himself enjoying the encounter and saw,

too, the advantage of keeping his temper when the other had lost his.

"Possibly!" Cron shouted. "I get what I go after, you young fool, and ——"

"Shut up!" Rod commanded sternly.

He had caught a glimpse of Beth crossing rapidly from the dwelling house.

"And get out of here," he added in a low voice. "There's nothing more you can say, Cron."

"Nothing more!" The Spider roared. "I'll show you! You've started more than you think. From now on I don't do any fooling. I'll make the bush so hot for you, you'll ——"

He stopped and whirled defensively as Beth's shadow fell across the floor.

"Why, Mr. Cron!" she exclaimed, as she stepped inside and crossed to the counter. "How ferocious you sound. Rod, give me some tea, please. And Jane wants some salt, too."

She turned from Rod, who had never known her to run errands for the housekeeper, and smiled brightly on The Spider.

"Surely you can't mean all you say," she continued.

"Every word!" he retorted savagely. "And if you think anything of your brother you'll get him out of the bush as quick as you can."

Beth laughed delightedly and then thrust her head forward impishly.

"Boo!" she cried. "Boo! We're not children

any longer. We've grown up. And we're not Indians. We don't believe you are a *windigo*. You can't hurt us and you know it."

Her dancing eyes met his savage glare.

"I'll drive the young squirt out before fall!" Cron shouted furiously.

"Mercy!" Beth put her hands to her ears in mock terror. "What a terrible creature you are. I've always thought you weren't a fur trader. Father beat you and this spring Rod did. You know —" She paused a moment and then added as if she were imparting a secret — "I hate to tell you, but I'm afraid you're nothing but a great, big, blustering bully."

She laughed again — laughed while the black brows arched and his hawk's nose seemed to hook out at her. He was choking with rage and his black eyes were murderous.

"Laugh!" he roared. "By fall you won't be laughing. You'll be finding it healthier outside. This fight ain't had any women in it yet but if you ask for it you're going to get it along with your brother."

Beth sensed a movement on Rod's part and put out a warning hand.

"Why, Mr. Cron!" she exclaimed. "You wouldn't hurt anyone. But you do love to scare folks, don't you. And listen! I've always wanted to ask you, ever since I was a little girl. Didn't you start that story yourself about your legs?"

The Spider lifted himself on his clenched fists as

if he were about to spring. For a moment he swung there, his great head far down between his massive shoulders, and then he turned swiftly and jerked himself out through the door.

Rod watched him in silence until he had disappeared beneath the bank. He turned to Beth.

"Jane got some tea yesterday," he said.

"But Rod! I saw him coming and he has never come over here before. And I heard him shouting at you."

"That's no reason why you ——"

"But I was afraid of what might happen."

"Look here, Beth. That's why I wanted you to go back to Toronto."

"You mean you are afraid of his threats — afraid, I mean, for me?" she demanded quickly.

"No, it isn't that."

"It is, Rod. The Spider is trying to drive you out. But he's just a big bully. I'm not afraid even if you are away some of the summer."

Rod hesitated. He was afraid for Beth, for he knew Cron was not boasting, that the man had determined to resort to any methods to win, but most of all he wished to shield her from the knowledge of his real fight against The Spider. Beth had recovered from the shock of her father's death and it would be needlessly cruel to darken her life with the story of the murder. She must know in time but that need be only when all anxiety for her safety was past.

"Besides, I'm not going back to college until this thing is finished!" the girl cried with sudden fervor. "It's my affair as much as yours and I'm going to stick it through."

"We'll talk that over later," Rod parried. "You're a brick but," and he laughed, "there's no need of it. As you told The Spider, he's only a bully and he's forgotten that we've grown up."

He pushed her ahead of him through the door.

"I'll be back soon," he said. "I'm going down to get those hunters ready for the wood cutting in the morning."

Beth started toward the house and then turned and asked abruptly:

"You haven't seen Marian since that night?"

"I didn't expect to."

"I think I'll go over to see her."

"No," he said decisively.

"You would rather I didn't?"

"Yes."

She was reassured by his confident, even jubilant, swing as he started down the shore toward the group of wigwams at the head of the bay, about an equal distance from the two posts.

And Rod was jubilant. The Spider was no longer the cold, patient, indomitable man who had borne defeat stoically, confident that in the end he would conquer, willing to bide his time. He had become irritable, intolerant, and was rasped by opposition. He had lost the thing which had been his greatest

strength — that air of ruthless purpose which, exemplified in the old squaw's wigwam, had always awed Rod and had even brought fear in his boyhood.

The fear and the awe were gone now. Rod had mastered them and in doing so he had gained the ascendency in the struggle. It was not that he held Cron's threats lightly. His father's murder was a constant reminder of the lengths to which the man's virulence would carry him, but that brought no terror. Rod, unlike Tom Norwood, was on his guard.

At the Indian encampment he stopped and joked with some women who were sewing moccasins in a wigwam and then passed on to a group of men who lay at full length on the ground, smoking and gossiping idly. His high spirits were quickly communicated to them, as an adult's animation is instantly reflected by children. Rod sat down beside them, filled a pipe and stretched out in the warm sun.

An old hunter began a long story. Suddenly it stopped. Rod, who had been lying flat on his back with his eyes closed, became conscious of a sudden tension. He looked up to see Jim, The Spider's tall half-breed, glowering down at him.

Jim stared for a moment and then turned to the hunters.

"Cron wants to send two canoes to the railroad in the morning," he said in Ojibwa. "Four of you get ready to go."

None of the hunters spoke. Rod sat up slowly and looked at Jim.

"These men begin cutting wood for me tomorrow," he said in English. "I have already hired them. Cron will have to wait until I am through."

There was a malevolent gleam in the half-breed's eyes but he did not reply directly to Rod. Instead he said to the Indians, still in Ojibwa:

"You had better come. Cron is very angry. At Mattawa, when he is this way, I have known him to become a *windigo*."

Rod leaped to his feet.

"Get out of here with that damned nonsense!" he shouted angrily in English, and then, turning to the Indians, he continued in Ojibwa: "He lies. Cron is not an evil spirit. He has no medicine. He has fooled the Mattawa hunters for years, has made slaves of them, and he is trying to do it with you. Jim lies and he knows he lies.

"Go back to your master," he said in English as he faced the half-breed. "Tell him that these Indians are not children. And if I hear of any more such talk from you I'll chase you out of the country."

Rod turned away as if disgusted with the hunters for even listening to the threat, but a faint sound, perhaps a premonition, caused him to look over his shoulder. Jim, his face distorted by passion, a butcher knife in one hand, was charging.

Rod knew instantly the tactical error he had committed and realized how he had stepped into The

Spider's trap by permitting the half-breed to provoke a quarrel. In a flash he saw Cron's scheme. He knew that Jim had been sent down the shore to kill him and that a fight staged before the Indians would be reported only as a quarrel in which Jim was the victor, without the slightest chance of a charge of murder being made against him.

It was as cowardly an effort to end the struggle as he could have expected. In the second Rod stood there, counting the chances against him, watching death approaching, he measured the results of his own blunder — Beth helpless and kinless, the end of the Norwoods, one hundred years of effort terminated by the ruthless, diabolical greed of this vulture of the north. There was even some slight wonder as to Marian's reactions.

Reason told Rod all this in a flash, but it was pure instinct that caused him to stoop, pick up a piece of wood and strike at the knife. He did not know he had acted until he saw the wood and weapon flying through the air. Then he threw himself to one side so quickly he fell headlong.

He was on his feet as Jim came charging back. The man was heedless in his fury, intent, Indian-fashion, only on getting his hands on his adversary. He rushed straight at Rod, his arms wide spread, lips drawn back from white teeth, his eyes like those of a wild animal.

Rod had never fought an Ojibwa, or a white man, but he knew how one must meet the Indian. Only

the primitive lust to kill governs the savage. The staggering blow, the clenched fist, the feint, the parry, none of these have any part in the Ojibwa idea of personal combat. He springs like a lynx, he seeks, like a bear, to get his arms around an opponent and crush him. His spirit is that of a weasel and he bites and tears like the little white demon of the north — that most terrible fighter for his ounces in the world.

The clenched fist and the straight arm jab are strictly the property of the white man, a product of civilization. The savage, unless trained, cannot use them, and he cannot stand the punishment. Bite off an Indian's ear and he will fight on heedlessly. Give him one stiff punch on the nose and his blind ferocity is undermined by an unaccustomed pain and bewilderment.

Rod remembered all this and understood what he must do, but calculation and knowledge are of little value except to the cool-headed veteran of many prize-ring battles.

And there were other dominating elements. Jim's primitive fury had the awesome background of the savage wilderness, of the north's hostility. Without looking at the half dozen hunters who had gathered in a half circle, Rod knew he could not depend on them for aid. They might be loyal to the Norwoods against another white man but the Ojibwa is always glad to see one of his race vanquish the secretly hated intruders.

The spot, too, was hidden from the post by a clump of spruce. There could be no hope of interference or of assistance. He must kill or be killed.

As Jim charged a second time, fear came to Rod. The stark savagery of the thing, the brute quality of the struggle, were unnerving. He thought of Beth and what might become of her, swung wildly and leaped to one side. But one of Jim's clawing hands reached his face and tore the skin.

Again the Indian swept down upon him and again Rod leaped. But Jim swerved, their bodies crashed, swayed, and then were locked by a grip about Rod's waist. He struggled to free himself, striking desperately at the snarling, bestial face so close to his own, and all the time Jim, taller and heavier, forced him back and down. Then Rod's foot slipped on the grass, but he whirled as he fell and Jim struck the ground with Rod on top. The crash broke his hold and Rod rolled free.

The half-breed was the first on his feet and he charged instantly. Rod, hardly set, struck with a swinging right and caught Jim on the cheek, staggering him. Rod stepped back, fearful that those long, crushing arms would encircle him again, and felt a large log at the back of his legs, cutting off retreat. Before he could dodge to one side Jim was upon him.

Rod struck, first with one fist, then with the other. His arms worked like pistons, wildly, in a fierce, last effort to drive back that hideous face and the

more hideous fate it foretold. Half his blows went wild, some glanced, a few struck ineffectively, and then, just as Jim's hands were upon him, a full swing caught the half-breed above the waist line.

Jim grunted, winced and drew back, but it was not his expression of pain and amazement that set Rod's heart to leaping. The instant his fist struck, full and square, a delirious, lifting sensation came to him. He was possessed of a desire to repeat it, to crunch his knuckles against those blazing eyes, to bruise that black, distorted face, to beat and pound and shatter.

He took a quick step forward, his first aggressive act, and again he landed, this time on Jim's nose. The half-breed staggered and Rod kept after him, striking wildly now and heedless of the long arms that reached for him, thinking only of that wonderfully exhilarating sensation of the crunching of flesh beneath his fists.

Back and forth, slipping, stumbling, charging and retreating, the two fought in the little open space among the wigwams. Rod landed other effective blows which brought that same uplifting emotion and a growing confidence. He forgot he was a lone white man surrounded by savages who would chuckle over his downfall, forgot Beth, the consequences of defeat. He experienced only a wonderfully expanding glory in the swing of his arms, the crashing impact, in a fierce, exultant mood that had been born in this brute struggle.

Yet Rod did not escape punishment. He beat Jim's face, cutting and bruising. He thrust his fists into the half-breed's stomach and ribs, but Aaron Cron's man was built of iron and fired by a fierce lust for blood. He staggered, winced, often retreated, but always he came back, his long arms reaching, his fingers spread claw-like, his teeth clenched but ready to snap into Rod's flesh.

Those teeth met once in the white man's shoulder. Those hands tore clothing and skin and hair. Twice those arms circled the white man's body and contracted crushingly, but through it all Rod battled with that new, enthralling sense of exquisite pleasure, with the mad joy that comes only in conflict.

In the end the white man's courage won. The half-breed's fury gave way to the instability of racial mixture. A chance swing sent Jim reeling, his heels caught a small log and he went down. But as Rod sprang forward he scrambled to his feet and scurried away among the wigwams.

Rod faced the Indians. They had watched the struggle in silence but with barbarous pleasure and unmistakable partisanship. Now they were cowed, though the lust for a white man's blood had not wholly died out. Behind them were the wigwams, beyond the gloomy swamp. All about lay the north — the empty, forbidding wilderness, the granite shore, the wolf-jaw crests of low, spruce-crowned ridges — and for the first time in his life Rod exulted in the

raw savagery of it. Its ugliness had vanished and he felt kinship with its primitive glory.

"You men come up early and get your axes in the morning," he said harshly in Ojibwa. "And don't take all summer to get in that wood."

He turned and walked quickly back to the post, unconscious of his wounds or of the blood drying on his face.

19

Stiff and sore, but still in an exultant mood, Rod went to the trade shop early the next morning. Marks of the encounter were on his face but his spirit soared with a rapturous sense of achievement, of oneness with his environment. For the first time since childhood he looked at the lake and the wide clearing and felt that it was home.

And now that the era of violence The Spider had threatened was actually begun, he found his courage welcoming the struggle. Cron had made the first move in what was nothing less than an attempt at murder, and he determined that his would be the second.

George Paul entered the trade shop a moment later and as soon as the door was closed he burst forth at his employer.

"You damn fool, Roddy! Ehe-bik, he send Jim down there to kill you."

"Yes, but Jim didn't do it."

"You been damn fool long enough!" George continued angrily. "Pretty soon he get you like he get Tom Norwood."

"He won't," was the confident answer. "I'm

watching, and from now on I'm hitting back. But see here! Don't you or Jane answer any of Beth's questions. She's worried enough already about the fight. Don't even talk to her about The Spider."

"But she ask question all the time."

"And I'll half kill you if either you or Jane tell her a word!" Rod exclaimed so aggressively that he awed the half-breed. "Tell Jane that. And another thing—The Spider'll have to get in his supplies. He can't hire Indians here. I've seen to that. He'll man his brigade with Mattawa hunters. You keep watch and if either Bapinini or Jim leave, tell me."

Rod wished he had a better means of espionage, for The Spider was too wary to be caught by a planted spy, but the stray bits of information he was able to pick up from one source or another dovetailed perfectly. Henry returned from Heathcote with the news that Cron's supplies were in the station, and George confirmed Rod's guess with the report that Bapinini, "The Laughing Man," had gone to Mattawa.

Rod's high spirits were not affected by the fact that he saw nothing of Marian. Their last interview, when he had sent Sharman away, had served to decide him as to the course he must pursue, and he was not disturbed when she did not visit the post.

But the day after the fight with Jim his determination was shaken when he saw Professor Ransom and Marian leave The Spider's post in a canoe

manned by two Indians. For a moment, as he watched with a telescope, he believed they were bound for the railroad. The glass trembled in his hands and he had only the one idea — to rush out and speak to her before she could pass out of his life.

Then the canoe turned toward the west, and inquiries among the Indians brought out the fact that the anthropologist was visiting a small summer encampment thirty miles away and expected to be gone a week or more.

A few days later Rod started for Black Sturgeon, taking one of the wood cutters and Beth with him. His sister was jubilant at the prospect of making the journey "of inspection" and thus fell readily into his plans to keep her away from the post during his absence. Just before he left, he called George into the trade shop.

"I'll be gone for a few days," he announced shortly. "You and Henry will have to watch the post."

"Why you go now?" the half-breed demanded. "The Spider, he do anything."

"I know, and I'm trusting you to see that he fails. Take turns standing guard every night. It's dark only five hours. If you see anyone around the buildings, shoot to kill."

George's eyes lighted.

"And don't either of you leave the post under any circumstances," Rod concluded.

The second morning out Rod and Beth met twelve Mattawa Indians. Rod purposely paddled close to the big freight canoe, that the strangers might get a good description of him to give to Cron and also to study the men themselves. He would have stopped for a talk had he not seen Bapinini in the canoe.

"The Spider's planning on doing some business this winter," Rod commented when they had passed.

"He never got in so many trade goods before," Beth said uneasily.

"No, nor will he again," Rod laughed.

"But he must have some plan."

"No, only hopes."

Andy Parr was surprised when his visitors paddled up to the post that night. He bustled about to make them welcome in the small cabin that served as a dwelling house and all the time he watched Rod furtively, waiting for some hint as to the object of his unexpected visit. But Rod talked only of inconsequential things, a fact which restrained Andy even from questioning him as to the healing cuts on his face.

It was not until the next morning that the two could be alone together.

"I'm after The Spider," Rod began. "Anything goes now."

"What started you?" Andy asked with a broad grin.

Rod related the story of the missionary and the subsequent events.

"You're liable to find the post burned down when you get back," the old trader commented.

"I don't think so. George Paul is a pretty good man in some ways and he hates Cron. Now at breakfast to-morrow I want you to suggest that I take a trip to Mattawa — sort of a spying-out proposition and to talk to a bunch of hunters camped near there."

Andy whittled his plug, crunched the shavings in his palm and filled his pipe.

"You're not going to settle it all at once, are you, lad?" he asked at last.

"No!" Rod answered harshly. "I told you I was going to whittle him down and I will. The other matter — well, I'd rather wait."

"It's sort of bad, having those outsiders around," Andy commented.

"You mean the Ransoms?"

"Yes."

Rod walked across the room and back before he answered.

"The Spider's trying to use them already," he said. "I've seen signs of it but I'm not letting it make any difference. Nothing else counts but getting him."

Something in Rod's tone caused Andy to glance at him sharply, but when he spoke he merely asked: "And I'm to keep your sister here for awhile?"

"Until I come back or send for her. Do you think Cron will start an outpost here this fall?"

"There's no hint of it yet and he would 'a been getting busy. I'm figuring he thinks he's so strong with these Mattawa Indians he don't have to."

"That may be it," answered Rod. "Well, I'll have to do all my traveling at night from now on."

"Yes, he'd be glad of a chance to pot you."

At the breakfast table the next morning Andy made the suggestion that Rod could do some missionary work around Mattawa.

"What's the use?" Rod objected.

"It's got talked about quite a bit, how we paid so much better prices last spring," Andy argued. "There's a dozen families camped fifty miles west of here and if you could get some of them to take 'debt' from us this fall it would be a good move."

After a show of reluctance Rod consented to make the journey.

"You stay here with Andy," he said to Beth. "I'll go alone."

He had expected she would object but she readily agreed and in mid-forenoon Rod took a small canoe and paddled away toward the west. The evening of the third day he was a hundred miles southeast, within fifty miles of Heathcote and on the brigade route to Lake Deception.

He had done much of his traveling at night, had chosen routes little traversed and had avoided all the known summer camps of the Indians. He felt certain no one had seen him since his departure from Black Sturgeon Lake.

After making camp in a carefully chosen spot, Rod took up his vigil on a point in a long, narrow lake. All the next day he lay there, watching, sometimes dozing for a few minutes, and an hour before sunset he saw what he had been waiting for. Three dark specks appeared down the lake, grew larger, at last came abreast. The Spider's brigade was passing at the time he had calculated.

The three great, heavily loaded freight canoes went on north within a hundred feet of the point on which he was watching. He could even hear the murmur of the Indians' voices and he recognized Bapinini, "The Laughing Man," in the stern of the leading craft. A quarter of a mile beyond the point, the brigade turned shoreward and landed on a sandy beach in a small bay.

It was a common camping place for the Norwood brigades and Rod knew it thoroughly. The beach was unusually wide and the tents were pitched far back from the water. Adequate shelter made it unnecessary to unload the canoes. The bows could be drawn up on the beach and left there for the night.

After watching The Spider's men prepare and eat their supper, Rod slipped back through the brush to his own camp and ate a cold meal. Midnight found him paddling quietly out from his shelter and across to the camping place of the Cron brigade.

Low clouds made the night dark enough for his purpose. He landed, eased one canoe after the other

from the beach, and shoved it gently out into the bay. There was no sound from the sleeping Indians. Satisfied that he had not been seen, Rod slipped quietly back into his own craft.

He was now practically safe, even though his presence were detected, but he still moved with the greatest caution, paddling to one freight canoe, working a few minutes, then going on to the next. A light breeze was blowing off the shore and when he had finished the three big craft were working slowly out into the lake. He kept beside them for a short time, satisfied himself that all was going as he wished, and then paddled swiftly away in the darkness.

Rod traveled all night and until noon the next day. After sunset he was again on his way and the forenoon of the third day he reached Black Sturgeon, arriving, as he had departed, from the west.

"That was a great idea of yours, Andy," he said after he had greeted Beth and the old trader. "I chinned up with quite a few Cron hunters. I think we're going to get somewhere this fall."

"I thought a little missionary work would do some good," Andy commented. "The Spider won't outfit so many this fall, eh?"

Rod glanced at him quickly. He had not divulged his plans, but he saw that Andy had guessed what he had been doing.

"No," he grinned. "Keep your eyes open. News of it will get to Cron and I'd like to hear how he

takes it. But let's have lunch. I want to get back home as soon as I can."

A few minutes later, while Beth was packing her personal belongings, Andy whispered: "Sink 'em?"

"The second day out of Heathcote," Rod answered. "Cron's crippled for fall outfitting, unless he rushes things in faster than he ever has before. I wish it was later but I had to get them when I could."

"You know, lad, this is bad business. It's going to start a lot of trouble."

"The trouble's already started."

"All right. If you're ready to take care of it. You tend to that end and don't worry about this."

"I won't," and Rod gripped the old trader's hand.

Two days later he and his sister reached the home post. As they landed Rod saw nothing at The Spider's post to indicate that news of the disaster to the brigade had reached Lake Deception and a few minutes later George Paul reported that nothing of importance had happened during his employer's absence.

But after lunch Rod saw a canoe approaching from the south. His glass told that it was Bapinini and two Mattawa Indians and he knew that, without a craft, they had been compelled to follow the shores until chance took them to an Indian encampment. In a few minutes The Spider would know.

Before supper everyone at Lake Deception had

heard that Cron's supplies had met disaster. George Paul grinned broadly when he talked to Rod in the trade shop but made no reference to the loss of The Spider's brigade other than to report the news of it. Rod merely expressed surprise.

But that night at supper Beth looked squarely at her brother and said: "Father never did a thing like that."

Rod glanced up in confusion — not because of the accusation but because he feared where the conversation might lead.

"And I know you wouldn't unless you had a reason," she continued. "It's time you began telling me the truth."

"But I have," he protested.

"First, you tried to keep me away from the post this summer," Beth persisted. "Ever since I've been here you've been pretending there was no reason to worry. Now I know. It was the day The Spider came over and made his threats that you had the fight with Jim. He sent Jim down there to fight you, or worse. Then you sunk his fall supplies. And Jane told me that every night we were gone George and Henry watched the post.

"Don't you see, Rod," and she leaned across the table, "you're not treating me fairly. If the situation is as dangerous as this, I ought to know it. I'm a Norwood just as much as you are and I want to know why you and The Spider are fighting each other this way."

"You've acquired a lot of misinformation," he began, but Beth leaped to her feet.

"I won't be babied!" she exclaimed.

"All right. I didn't want to tell you for fear you might be worried. Last spring Cron tried to buy the post. Offered five thousand and when I laughed at him he said he'd drive me out if I didn't sell. He tried to ruin us with his fake missionary and when that didn't work he sent Jim down to scare me. Just to show him that it didn't, I struck back. As for watching the post buildings, that was only a precaution."

"And now?" she asked eagerly.

"If he does anything more I'll keep on striking until he's had enough."

"I'm glad you've told me!" Beth exclaimed in relief. "And he's nothing but a big bully. Imagine Marian defending a man like that!"

"What makes you think she does?" Rod asked quickly.

"You told me how she acted that night you drove Sharman out and she hasn't been here since it happened."

"She's been away, for one thing."

"They're expected back any day now. I just hope she comes over." Beth's eyes darkened. "I'd like to tell her what sort The Spider is."

Rod frowned. He did not want anyone pleading the Norwood cause. Pity, a weakling's weapon, would not carry him through Marian's defenses.

"No," he said shortly. "Let Cron do the talking. Besides, she was pretty badly cut up because of the way I used her tip about his going to Mattawa."

"But you had a right to it. She ought to know such things are fair in buying fur and if she doesn't I'm going to tell her. What right has she to judge other people's actions?"

Rod smiled.

"Look here, Beth," he said. "You were born in the bush and you don't know what a New England ancestry can be. Leave her alone. There are some things she doesn't understand but I'd rather she'd find out for herself, as she will in time." He paused for a moment and then added fiercely, "Besides, we don't need whitewash."

Beth studied her brother for a moment, her eyes still flashing, and then she smiled.

"All right, Rod," she said. "If that's the way you'd rather have it. But you want to remember," and she smiled mischieviously, "you have only this summer."

20

Whatever The Spider thought of the loss of his brigade, or what he planned in retaliation, Rod did not learn. He only knew that two canoes were dispatched southward within an hour of the arrival of Bapinini. As the days passed and the stranded Mattawa Indians did not appear, Rod began to suspect that Cron had ordered new canoes and new supplies to be rushed in and that his Indians were waiting for them at Heathcote.

But the very tranquility in the enemy's post was ominous, for Rod knew what The Spider's rage must be. He had been told of the first terrible outburst when the news came, yet a week passed with nothing happening except the return of the Ransoms.

The forenoon after their arrival Rod saw Marian paddling across the bay. He left the trade shop and strolled down to the lake to meet her.

"Hello," she called as her canoe touched the bank. "Is Beth at home?"

There was no hint of hostility in her manner.

"Yes," he answered. "Have a nice trip?"

"Father found it very successful. I didn't have much to do. Can I see Beth?"

"Surely. We'll go and find her."

Marian stopped and faced him.

"I'd rather go alone," she said steadily. "There are some things I want to say to her."

"I wouldn't," he advised. "I've already explained why you didn't come over."

"Then there is all the more reason why I should state my side of it," Marian flared.

"Better not. Beth has a temper. Besides, I told her what you said to me that night. That must be your side of it."

"But you told your side, too, and that would change things entirely."

"No, I don't have to defend myself to Beth."

There was unmistakable defiance in Rod's tone.

"But you seem to forget that I was there, that I saw it," Marian protested. "Mr. Sharman appealed to me."

"You were there part of the time, and Sharman was grasping at any straws. Moreover, he knew he could count on you to pass judgement against me."

The taunt was intentional and Marian flushed as she sensed Rod's intent.

"But that is not all," she began indignantly.

"And you may be equally mistaken about other things," he interrupted coldly. "Let's go find Beth."

Marian stiffened. As always, she was more beautiful in her anger and Rod's thoughts whirled. His heart seemed to crowd into his throat and it was harder than at any moment since he had known her

to await the complete capitulation her defiance demanded, but he struggled for control.

"I wanted to be fair!" Marian exclaimed. "I offered you an opportunity to explain."

"And I didn't chose to take it," he replied. "It's a poor faith that demands proof. Does Cron subject his conduct to your scrutiny?"

"He doesn't have to!" Marian flared. "The facts are there for anyone to see. And you don't dare explain. Oh, it's all so useless. I don't know why I even talk to you about it."

There was a broken, beaten note in her voice that carried Rod to her. If only he could claim her at such a moment, claim her so completely that the warm, soft loveliness could be freed forever from the rigid framework, there would be no necessity for the wasteful struggle between them.

"Do you know why you talk about it?" he asked softly. "It's because you want to. Down in your heart you know that moment in the canoe was the truest in your life. Why don't you admit it?"

"Don't speak to me about it!" Marian burst forth. "How I've hated myself! You — you are contemptible even to remind me of it."

She turned and walked swiftly to the dwelling house and Rod returned to the trade shop. An hour later he saw the two girls going to the shore together. They were laughing and chatting and walked arm in arm. In a moment Marian stepped into her canoe and paddled away.

But Beth was troubled when Rod entered the living room just before luncheon.

"Marian tried to talk to me," she began.

"Yes?" and Rod busied himself with his pipe. "What did you have to say?"

"I did just as you told me. I said nothing. But I wanted to. The Spider's using her."

"But Marian doesn't know it," he said quickly.

"That only makes it worse. She feels sorry for him."

"Then my having legs is a handicap, eh?" Rod grinned. "Well, I need them and if you're suggesting ——"

"Don't be silly." Beth came over and seated herself on the arm of his chair. "Can't you see that if you'd only tell her what sort of a man The Spider is and what he's done she would feel sorry for you?"

"But I don't want her sympathy!"

"You want something else. You can't fool a sister. And I know Marian. We've talked hours together. She's always mothering something. Look at the way she cares for her father. And even the men she knew down in The States — they always had something the matter with them — sweet souls who couldn't make a living or scientists who forgot to eat or take a bath."

"She never married any of them," Rod remarked.

"No, but she might if they had been as nice as you. That's what I'm trying to tell you. And you haven't

much time left. She's leaving in two days for the rice harvest. After that they're going back to The States."

Rod had been thinking the same thing, had been struggling with the situation for days, but now Beth's chatter had confirmed his original decision. He smiled as he thought of how little Beth really knew of the girl who had revealed herself so completely in that rapturous moment in the canoe but he said nothing.

"At first I was angry with Marian," Beth continued, "but I'm not now. I like her better than any girl I ever knew and I think I understand. It isn't what she says. It's just something you feel. I'm awfully sorry for her."

"Of course," Rod laughed. "Anyone who doesn't see your brother's charm is to be pitied."

"Rod Norwood! You're so pig-headed. If you'd only listen to me."

"I'm not sure that either Marian or I want to listen," he said as he stood up and set her on the floor. "Betsy, you're a brick, but you have a marvelous imagination. And the fur trade needs it. You focus on The Spider and tell me what he's planning, now that we've sunk his supplies."

He kissed her and hurried from the room. Beth, watching him stride across the grass, unmindful that he had forgotten lunch, wondered at his exuberance. She had tried so hard to help him, and had done it so unwittingly.

She wondered still more the next day as Rod drove George Paul and Henry to a burst of fresh duties. Trade goods were unpacked and sorted and an Indian was sent out to round up hunters to man the canoes that were to bring in the additional supplies Rod had ordered.

These men, when they arrived, were set to work whitewashing the post buildings. There was constant activity about the Norwood post, and constant vigilance. Every night since his return Rod had maintained a guard, taking for himself the middle and most important watch.

"That new whitewash, she fine rig!" George exclaimed. "No matter how dark, you see somebody sure."

"Didn't you guess that before?" Rod laughed.

Immediately after breakfast one morning Rod went to the trade shop. In a few minutes the door opened and Marian entered.

"Mr. Cron says you have so influenced the Indians he can't get anyone to work for him," she began.

Rod looked at her steadily for a moment, saw that she was angry, and then smiled.

"Such an admission on his part is good news to me," he said.

"But is there any reason you should include us in your fight against Mr. Cron?"

"I didn't know I had done so. Does he say I have?"

"He wouldn't have to say so. You knew father

and I wished to start to-day and that we had to have Indians to take us. Yet you have arranged it so that everyone would be busy."

Rod was troubled, not because of Marian's accusation but because of what lay behind it. He recognized The Spider's influence and he knew, too, that Cron had not made any effort to hire canoemen for her.

What the man hoped to gain by this deception, what sort of scheme it foretold, he was unable to guess. He knew Cron already had a brigade waiting at Heathcote. Marian was being used, but to what purpose he could not imagine.

The girl still stood in the center of the floor. When he did not speak, when he made no defense or denial, she turned toward the door.

"I didn't come over here to beg a favor," she said. "If this is petty retaliation because I dared to criticise your methods, if your vanity demands that I acknowledge your power in this district, then the sooner the Norwood influence at Lake Deception is ended the better. We are going to the rice harvest despite your tricks. I'll get canoemen somehow."

She went out, closing the door behind her, and through a window Rod saw her hurrying back to her canoe.

He forgot The Spider and his schemes, forgot everything except that look of scorn and disappointment he had seen in her eyes. Never had she appeared so lovely, so magnificently unbeaten, as when

she stood there, her blue eyes dark with anger, her slim body straight and defiant, the crinkling strands of black hair dancing in the breeze from the open door.

In that moment nothing counted but his love for her and he could not permit her to leave Lake Deception believing he had indulged in so petty a trick to bring about her humiliation. He hurried to the lake, threw a canoe into the water and paddled swiftly toward The Spider's post.

Marian was landing as he started and when she climbed the bank he called to her. She turned, saw him, hesitated a moment and then waited for him to reach the shore.

As Rod paddled up beneath the high bank, the door of The Spider's house opened and Cron swung himself out and onto the bench where he so often sat in good weather. He was only fifty feet from Marian but she did not see him, nor did Rod know of his presence there until he had landed and climbed the bank. Even then he only glanced at Cron before he spoke.

"I'll get you two canoemen," he said to Marian. "I'll have them ready this noon or to-morrow morning, whichever you wish."

He had been intent only on convincing her of the injustice of her criticism — on saving her from the belief in his unworthiness.

"You must know, Marian," he rushed on, "that I haven't any desire to injure your father's plans, im-

pede his work, or do anything to distress you. You can't believe that of me."

As he spoke the expression of defiance vanished from her eyes and one of pity and sorrow took its place.

"Rod," she said slowly, "I have never wanted to believe anything of you but the best. That time when — in the canoe — I was sure I always would."

He was about to answer when he saw a malicious grin broaden The Spider's heavy face and it maddened him to think the man should hear.

"Come back to the post," he whispered harshly. "There are some things I'd like ——"

"It's too late, Rod," Marian said gently. "That's all dead now. There's no need talking of it."

"It's not dead!" he retorted in a low voice. "I know you — your every thought and emotion." He saw The Spider straining to hear and continued in a whisper: "You love me! You're going to keep on loving me when ——"

"Love you!" she interrupted. "After the things you've done!"

"But Marian!" he pleaded. "You don't understand, you don't know what ——"

"Don't understand!" she cried. "I understand how you came over here when Mr. Cron was away and drove Mr. Sharman out with a gun. I understand how you picked a fight with a half-breed — a man who knew nothing of personal encounter and has always been inoffensive — and pounded him to a

jelly while a lot of your Indian slaves looked on. And knowing that, I understand how you sneak out in the night and sink a crippled man's canoes and their valuable freight."

Her anger had mounted and now she seemed to throw off all restraint.

"I despise myself!" she cried. "I despise myself for that moment of silly sentimentality in the canoe. I despise myself for thinking I could find anything clean and brave and big in the wilderness. I thought it bred men. In those first days I believed you were one of them, but since you have done nothing but degrade the thing we had, the thing that began so beautifully and ended so quickly because — because you ——" She broke off, choked by anger.

Rod, though his face was white and he twitched from the sting of her unrestrained lashing, looked steadily into the blazing blue eyes, for with startling clearness he had seen what he must do.

He knew he could justify his every act, could make her understand how he was fighting for his life and to discharge a debt he had inherited, but he saw the unwisdom of a belated explanation. It would remove the barrier which had come between them but it would leave only a void — something far more dangerous because it would rob them even of the contact of struggle. He could not temporize or tear down. He must build up success and justification and let her discover it. For unconsciously Marian had revealed herself in her furious denunciation. Nothing

less than dominance, a spirit stronger and bigger than her own, could soften her.

Rod looked at the evil, grinning visage of the legless man on the bench. The Spider must have grinned like that, he thought, when Jim and Bapinini brought back word that Tom Norwood was dead — when he had sent Jim down to the Indian camp to pick a fight that would cloak a murder.

There, he saw, lay the answer. He must go on unswervingly to his first goal, but swiftly now, for Marian would be gone in another month. In no other way could he justify himself. Now he would win only her pity.

He turned back to her. She still stood with her head thrown back, the breeze whipping the crinkled strands of dark hair across the marvelous rose of her cheeks, her blue eyes dark with scorn, her slim body rigid with emotion.

"You can wait!" he whispered savagely. "You come second."

He turned, jumped down the bank and leaped into his canoe and paddled across the bay, landed and walked up to the trade shop, without once looking back.

Marian watched him for a moment and then started toward the house. For the first time she saw The Spider sitting outside the door. He was not grinning now.

"Guess the young squirt ought to know now

what you think of him," he said as she approached.

For a moment her eyes glinted dangerously and then she asked:

"Can you get me two canoemen to start tomorrow morning?"

"I'll try," he answered.

"Try!" she repeated. "You're not going to let him beat you that way?"

"You see how it is here. If my brigade was in it would be different. He's ready to send out a brigade himself, from what I hear, and he's got the rest of those hunters cutting wood."

"There's Jim and Bapinini."

"But they're my legs, miss. You know that. I'd like to help you but I can't let them go. No telling what young Norwood would do if I were here helpless. And with getting ready for the fall trading I can't spare them."

There was an unaccustomed humility and hesitancy in his manner, which escaped Marian because of her anger.

"I'll go down to the Indian camp myself," she said. "I'll offer double wages and I guess two of them will go."

"Better let me do that for you," The Spider hastened to say. "I could work it better, knowing the red beggars longer than you have. No," and there was sudden decision in his voice, "dont worry. I'll get 'em for you."

Marian went on into the house, but for a long time Aaron Cron sat on his bench outside the door. When at last he returned to his accustomed place on the bunk in the living room he swung himself up with a grunt of satisfaction. He had the air of a man who had solved a difficult problem.

21

Not even Beth dared to speak to Rod that day. It was a hard-faced, hard-eyed young trader who landed, jerked the canoe from the water and leaped up the bank. He strode across the grass to the trade shop, through to the office at the rear and slammed the door behind him.

Beth had watched from a living room window, had seen him paddle across the bay and talk to Marian. Jane had watched from the kitchen, George Paul from the trade shop, but only Beth understood what it might mean.

Two hours later Rod came out of the office.

"Get rations for twelve men, Heathcote and back," he said to George Paul. "The brigade starts tomorrow morning. You go with it. I'll give you three rifles and you are to keep guard each night. The brigade must get in."

George's eyes lighted and his thick lips tightened in a grin.

"Henry stay with you?" he asked.

"Yes, we'll watch the post."

He gave detailed instructions as to how the brigade was to be guarded in camp and on the

portages, the sort of camping places that were to be chosen.

"Jim, he go down to the camp little while ago," the half-breed said when Rod had finished.

Rod walked to a window and looked up the bay.

"Coming back now," he said. "I'll go down and tell the hunters to be ready to start with you early in the morning."

As he had expected, and hoped, The Spider's half-breed had hired two men to take the Ransoms north to the rice harvest the next morning. Rod did not approve of one of them as competent to take two strange white people so far into the wilderness. He was lazy and unreliable and, after a little argument, was induced to go with the brigade. A better man promised to take his place. There were still thirteen men and Rod chose twelve for his own work and told them to be ready early the next morning.

That afternoon he was busy giving out rations to the families of the canoemen, for in the fur trade an Indian always insists that he be paid in advance. Most of the women and children would leave at once for Seigenagaw, to be joined later by their husbands.

The hunters themselves grumbled because they were to miss some of the rice harvest festivities. They pointed out to Rod that his father had never dispatched a brigade at that time. For a while mutiny threatened but Rod would not even argue with them. The savage mood in which he had returned from The Spider's post persisted and his anger awed

and subdued the Indians. They remembered his fight with Jim.

Yet Rod knew fear could not be counted on any more than their promise, and in the evening he returned to the encampment and remained until after dark. He felt confident The Spider would make some move to influence his canoemen, but nothing happened.

Early the next morning he was up to get the brigade away as soon as possible. He went to the wigwams, gathered the hunters and led them to the post. Perhaps the Indians sensed his grim determination, for there were none of the usual delays. The canoes were away soon after seven.

A half hour later Rod, from a trade shop window, watched Marian and her father depart for Seigenagaw. Before they went down to the canoe he saw Jim talking to their Indians and then to The Spider, who sat on his bench outside, and he knew they were discussing the change in canoemen. For the first time in twenty-four hours, Rod grinned. In itself, it amounted to little, and yet it was only another thrust at Cron, an indication that the Norwoods still held control over their hunters.

Once the brigade was away, Rod turned his whole attention to watching The Spider's movements and guarding against any sort of attack. A day later the Mattawa Indians arrived with the supplies ordered to take the place of those that had been destroyed. Rod had counted on their being too late

for the fall outfitting but Cron evidently had exerted influence somewhere to get a quick shipment from the east.

The Mattawa Indians left for the west the next day, Jim and Bapinini remaining with Cron. The families of most of the hunters also departed for Seigenagaw, leaving only three or four wigwams at the head of the bay.

The usual August quiet settled over Lake Deception. Each year the post was deserted thus while the Indians were gathering rice, but now, though everything was calm on the surface, there was a tenseness never before known.

Rod was alert every moment, spending hours each day watching The Spider's post and the movements of his two assistants. Each night he and Henry remained on guard, waiting for a possible attack or an effort to burn the buildings. In view of the murder of his father and the attempt to murder him, Rod knew Cron would not hesitate at anything, that he was now desperate enough even to make open warfare of it.

It was this that Rod prayed for, because only through drastic action on The Spider's part was it possible to bring a quick termination of the struggle. His first plan of campaign meant patience, and patience was impossible when he knew that in another month Marian would leave the north forever.

But nothing happened. No one came near the post at night. Jim and Bapinini seldom left the buildings

across the bay, and then only on the usual daily tasks.

At the beginning Rod had known it would be impossible to deceive Beth. She was too wise in the ways of fur land not to understand and the first day he took her into his confidence enough, as he believed, to keep her from asking too many questions.

"But why is The Spider doing this?" she demanded.

"Because he is desperate," Rod told her. "He is close to bankruptcy and he believed, when dad died, that he would have an easy time here. Now he is being licked worse than before. I am getting into him badly in his own territory, and he sees it is now or never. He knows we were in bad shape financially last spring and he's trying to push us over the edge."

"But father and The Spider never fought this way."

"No, but The Spider threatened to, only he didn't dare with dad. He threatened to with me and I agreed. That's why I wrecked his brigade. The best way to meet that sort of an attack is to hit first."

"You mean he made the threat that day he came over and I heard you talking in the trade shop?" Beth asked.

"Yes, just after I had kicked out the fake missionary."

She looked at him questioningly for a moment and then smiled.

"This is fun, Rod," she said. "What can I do to help?"

"For one thing, you can stick around the kitchen whenever any of the women come to visit Jane," he told her. "I don't want a bit of information of any sort to leak out. And you can take your turn watching day times to give Henry and me a chance for a little sleep."

Thus it was Beth who discovered that Bapinini was not at The Spider's post. "I haven't seen him all day," she reported.

That night Rod learned that the half-breed had departed early in the morning. The tension increased. For the first time Rod seemed worried and then, nine days after their departure, his three canoes returned from Heathcote. The loads were carried into the warehouse, but the next morning, long before daylight, they were back in the canoes. Before anyone in The Spider's post could see, the brigade was on its way to Black Sturgeon Lake with fresh supplies for Andy Parr.

"That'll fool him," Rod chuckled when he and Beth had breakfast. "He has thought we had only the usual small trading outfit at the new post. Now there'll be enough to take care of a lot of his hunters."

"If it gets there," Beth said.

"Don't worry about that," was the confident answer. "In the first place The Spider won't know it's gone until too late. In the second, George will see that the goods are turned over to Andy Parr.

And after that — well, I'm not worrying about Andy."

"But what *is* The Spider going to do?" Beth demanded. "If he doesn't stop this brigade, if he doesn't burn down the post, what can he do?"

"I don't see what there is left for him," Rod said. "I've put myself in his place time and again and I haven't found a loophole. I think, Beth, this winter will see the end of Aaron Cron on Lake Deception."

Yet Rod did worry. He knew The Spider would not quit. He knew he was planning some form of attack but, though he increased his vigilance, though George and the Indians returned safely from Black Sturgeon, though everything seemed ready for Cron's final defeat in the fall outfitting, there were no indications of how the blow would fall.

Immediately after his return, George Paul discovered that Jim was no longer across the bay. Rod, studying the Cron post with his telescope, saw a strange half-breed acting as The Spider's assistant. George identified him as a man from Mattawa.

Day after day passed. August was almost gone. The first of the Indian families began to straggle in from the rice harvest. Each night saw a few more wigwams at the head of the bay. Hunters and their families hung about the trade shop in increasing numbers. Rod noted with satisfaction that few of them visited The Spider's post.

His own plans, evolved during the summer, were complete. The coming of the railroad had brought

to the Indians a desire for "store clothes." Tom Norwood had fought it, insisting that they buy the far more serviceable capotes and strouds. In the spring trading there had been a more insistent demand and Rod had seen in it an opportunity.

Through the Montreal fur company he had been able to pick up the stock of a bankrupt dealer in a small, eastern Ontario town. Nearly a hundred suits, cheap and wholly inadequate for the hunters' work but clothes they would insist on having and ultimately would get from The Spider if not from him, were in the trade shop, ready for distribution at a ridiculously low price.

"The moment the outfitting begins," Rod told Beth, "I'll put these suits in sight. When they learn we have them, and at that figure, no hunter will go across the bay, no matter what Cron may do."

"It's a shame to sell such clothes," his sister said.

"I know it, and I feel guilty. It's one of the evils of opposition, though. If The Spider weren't here we could make them buy serviceable outfits. After this fall——"

He broke off significantly.

"But Rod! The Spider isn't lying down."

"I don't know what he can do. Things are sewed up tight for us.

"Jim and Bapinini are probably over at Black Sturgeon now," Beth suggested.

"Perhaps, but if they do anything it won't be

vital. Our post there is small. Besides, I'm trusting Andy Parr."

"Anything The Spider does must come in a few days now," the girl mused. "The hunters will be gone at the end of next week."

"We'll just tighten up all along the line," Rod assured her, "keep a good guard at night, watch things all day. Why, Beth, we can't lose."

"Do you know," Beth said the next day, "that every hunter has returned from the rice harvest and the Ransoms haven't come?"

"Probably the professor is staying to see some old men who don't get down for the fall outfitting," Rod answered. "There are usually some there."

In the afternoon Beth made inquiries among the Indian women who visited Jane in the kitchen. She learned that Marian and her father had left Seigenagaw ten days before and had gone north to see an old Indian who was unable to come down to the rice harvest.

The next morning, while watching The Spider's post from the trade shop, Beth saw two Indians loading canoes. Their families were with them and evidently they were making preparations to depart for the winter's hunt. Astonished that The Spider had been able to get anyone to take "debt" from him, she brought the telescope to bear and discovered that the women were the wives of the Ransom canoemen.

Rod was still asleep, after having stood guard most of the night, and Beth ran to the house and wakened him. She carried the telescope and from a living room window he was able to identify the men as the two who had taken Marian and her father to Seigenagaw. Now they had returned alone.

Slowly he lowered the telescope and stared. Beth, watching him closely, waiting for a word, saw the color leave his face. Then the telescope dropped to the floor with a clatter.

Neither gave it a thought. Beth's face was white now. Rod moistened his lips. His throat contracted sharply.

"It's the only thing I never thought of," he whispered in a dead voice.

"But he wouldn't dare!" Beth cried.

"Dare!" Rod repeated. "He'll dare anything."

Beth turned to the window. The Indians and their families were paddling away, the canoes so low in the water it seemed that a ripple would slap over the gunwales.

"Maybe it isn't that!" she exclaimed. "Perhaps the Ransoms had trouble with the men and someone else is bringing them in."

"Who else?" he demanded. "Every hunter is accounted for. And Jim and Bapinini! They've been gone so long. Don't you see, Beth?"

"But why would he? You don't mean — ? My God, Rod! Marian! The black beast!"

She reached both hands toward him, helplessly, pityingly. Rod was staring at her but did not seem to see her. She looked away when she saw his eyes. For a full minute neither moved or spoke.

"I'm going down to see some of the hunters," Rod said at last, and there was a curious mixture of despair and savage resolution in his voice. "I'll check up on this. I can find out. You get ready to leave for Black Sturgeon — right away. George'll stay. I'll take Henry."

"You're going to — to leave the post — now?" she cried. "That means — it means Cron gets all the hunters!"

"Good God, Beth! I can't stay. I know it's a threat, a ruse, but he'll go through with it. He'll do anything. I've got to find her!"

"I know," she hastened to soothe him. "I didn't mean it that way. I was thinking of you, of all you've done, all you've given up because of me, and now — of course, you must go, Rod. Only to have him ——"

Suddenly she was choked by anger and could not speak.

"The Spider's won," Rod said bitterly. "I've been a fool to think I had him. I might have known he would wait to strike now, when the hunters are here for their outfifits, when a whole year's success can be decided in four days. But he saw his chance some weeks ago. That day before she left, he heard us

talking. He knew I'd drop everything to find her. That," and he pointed to the departing canoes, "only proves it. He's sending those men away when I'll see them, so that I'll know — and have to go."

"But that doesn't mean —" Beth began, and then stopped because she saw the futility of raising false hopes.

"It means the end here for us," he said harshly. "George can't handle such a situation. He can't outfit the hunters. There isn't time to get Andy Parr. I can't tell the Indians to wait until I get back. Even if they should agree to, it would be easy for The Spider to start any sort of a story about me and stampede them to him."

"Go find her, Rod!" Beth cried. "Find her and bring her back and I'll stay here. I'll run things, outfit the hunters. No one can lick a Norwood."

Rod's face became white.

"You don't know what you're talking about," he said. "You don't know The Spider. Why, Beth ——"

He grasped her by the arm and gave her a shake.

"You go to Black Sturgeon!" he exclaimed savagely. "This morning. Understand? Why — why, Beth, I wouldn't leave you here no matter what happened. Not even for Marian. You'll go? Promise you will."

She understood only the emotion that swayed him, his fear for her. It was so great that pity deadened

her to the possible reason back of his horror of her remaining at Lake Deception.

"I promise," she said.

Rod brightened instantly.

"Get ready!" he cried. "I'm going down to check up on what happened at Seigenagaw. I'll get two men to take you to Black Sturgeon. We'll both be away before noon — travel until night — Amik Lake. Then I'll be sure you're not followed."

"But Rod! That Seigenagaw country! And beyond! How can you get trace of Marian?"

"I'll get her!" he exclaimed savagely. "I must! Don't you see?" His voice trembled and all the fight went out of him. "I got her into this. I could have warned her, not that this might happen, for I never dreamed of such a thing, but about The Spider, the sort he is, the things he'll do. Only I was too bull-headed. I let her go on and be the innocent victim. I've got to, Beth! I've got to find her."

He started unsteadily toward the door and a wordless cry rose in Beth's throat as she watched him.

Then he turned and this time fury had drawn the color from his face.

"The Spider's won here," he said in a flat voice. "I can't stop him getting the fur, ruining us financially. He'll outfit these hunters. We won't be able to settle with our creditors. They'll close us out — close out the Norwoods."

He stopped and Beth shuddered at the look that had come into his eyes.

"George Paul!" he whispered in an awed, hoarse tone. "Andy! They were right. They knew. And I — I wanted to do it my way. I told her she came second. I was a fool. Marian — Marian first. And then you, Cron."

22

When Rod and Henry reached Lake Seigenagaw the great bare point on which the Indians camped after the rice harvest was deserted. Naked wigwam poles and empty drying racks only added to the tenantless aspect of the place.

But Rod had expected this. He had not hoped to find the least indication of the Ransoms' whereabouts. It could serve simply as a starting point for his search. At Lake Deception he had gathered all the information possible in the two hours before he and Beth started northward and all he learned had confirmed that first, swift, intuitive grasp of the situation.

The hunters told him Marian and her father had remained at Seigenagaw throughout the harvest and the ten days of subsequent festivities. The professor had spent all his time with the Indians, listening to stories, asking more questions than there were needles on the spruce trees, writing more words than there were grains of sand on the beach.

The daughter, however, had seldom come near the encampment but remained near her own tent down the shore. Neither did she smile so much, the Indian

women said, and she spent many hours alone, sitting on a rock at the water's edge and staring across the lake.

These were the things of which the Indians talked freely. Rod asked many questions before he finally learned the story of what had happened. Jim and Bapinini had appeared. For a day they lay around, smoking, gossiping, occasionally taking part in the dances. That night, after many families had departed for Lake Deception, they spent long hours talking with the two men who paddled "The Story Man's" canoe.

The next day the two canoemen went to the professor's tent. They told him, it was understood, of a very old Indian who was camped forty miles farther north and who knew more of the older stories of his people than any other.

"The Story Man" became greatly excited and the following morning, when the last families were leaving, he and his daughter started northward. They went up an arm of Seigenagaw which could lead only to Lake Wunnummin, from which flowed the Otoskwin River. The day before Jim and Bapinini had departed toward the southwest. They said they were going to Mattawa for the fall outfitting, that The Spider had decided they should work there during the winter.

All this, trival as it was, had been much discussed at Lake Seigenagaw. The Indians thought little of it, however, until they saw "The Story Man's"

canoemen paddle up to The Spider's place, to be outfitted by Cron with many trade goods and quickly to depart with their families for their hunting districts far to the east.

Rod did not detail all this information to Beth when they camped together the first night out from Lake Deception. The next morning she had gone on westward, he across a portage and north. They parted without his telling her that he was now certain Marian and her father had been deserted, that he might search the wilderness for weeks without getting trace of them.

And Rod did not doubt for a moment but that The Spider's plans contained no provision for the ultimate safety of the Ransoms. The Spider would not care what happened to them, once they had served his purpose — had decoyed Rod from the post at the most crucial time of the year. The helpless girl and her still more helpless father might be left on an island to starve to death and Cron, even should an investigation lead to his door, could easily clear himself of any responsibility. He need only point to the fact that Rod had substituted one of the canoemen and that both were Norwood hunters.

Had he not been convinced that The Spider was capable of utter ruthlessness, Rod knew that he still would have accepted financial ruin, would have deserted his post to search for Marian. He saw her now, not as a defiant nature, a spirit challenging his own, not as a girl unconsciously demanding domi-

nance, but as something ineffably precious, placed in a terrifying and hazardous position because of his own actions.

He cursed himself, and his cursing added weight to his paddle as he and Henry went on northward from Seigenagaw. They traveled until dark each night, watched constantly for smoke, studied portage trails and camp sites anxiously, and all the time Rod's remorse increased and his self-accusation grew more bitter.

From the beginning he had expected a long and difficult search. By whatever means Jim and Bapinini had induced the two Indians to desert Marian and her father, he felt certain they had arranged it in a place that would be exceedingly hard to find. Yet, for all his remorse and contrition, he had not left Lake Deception with nothing except blind hope and determination. Very carefully he had checked over the stories told by the Indians, working out dates and distances, and from the time of the arrival of the two canoemen at The Spider's post he had concluded that they could not have gone more than fifty miles down the Otoskwin River.

The third day after leaving Seigenagaw, Rod reached the lake on which he had estimated that Marian might be found and the moment the canoe whirled out of the swift current, and he saw the great expanse before him, his hopes sank. The lake was broken by countless islands and points. Long, twisting arms sprawled in every direction, not unlike

the curving limbs of an octopus, and one of them widened and gave a glimpse of a vast sweep, the farther shore of which lay below the horizon.

As Rod knelt there in the canoe, his paddle trailing, he knew what such a lake might be. There are many of them in the north — vast, irregular bodies of water upon which a man may wander for a week without finding the way out. "Lake of a Thousand Lakes" one was named by the first French voyageurs.

There is something terrifying about them, as the north itself is terrifying. Dormant and unresisting, still they symbolize the aggressive nature of the land. They lie there in wait, ready to mislead and bewilder, to beat down at last through sheer despair.

Rod did not fear this lake for himself. He was woodsman enough to find his way out of its unmapped reaches, once he had entered the maze, but to find one spot in that spreading network of waterways, and to find it quickly, was the more hopeless because he knew the north. He must paddle into each arm and bay, visit each island, add several hundred miles to his journey and decrease by that much the possibilities of success.

Henry, in the bow, was not swayed by Rod's emotions and fears. The moment the canoe rounded the last bend in the river and the lake lay before him, the half-breed youth began studying the shores, starting on the right. That finished, he turned toward the left. For a moment he looked and then he calmly announced: "I guess that them over there."

"What!" Rod exclaimed. "Where?"

He had already caught the direction from Henry's position and saw a thin, wavering line of smoke above the trees on an island a mile out in the lake. Instantly he dug in his paddle and shoved the canoe forward.

There could be no doubt but that it was Marian and her father. Every Indian who could travel was now at a trading post being outfitted for the winter's hunt. Even if some old man or woman had been left behind, an island never would have been chosen for a camping spot, while The Spider's plans would call for nothing else.

Yet as the canoe leaped forward and Rod's paddle bent until it seemed ready to snap, as he studied the long, narrow island and saw that the smoke rose from the farther end, doubts came to him. There had been unmistakable signs that Marian had been brought this far north — her footprints on a portage, a hairpin at a camping place — and yet it could not have been part of The Spider's plan to have her found so easily, to have her deserted on the main waterway when all the ramifications of a great, unknown lake lay at hand.

When they were a quarter of a mile from the island Henry spoke again.

"There she is," he said, and nodded his head toward the south end of the island.

Marian was sitting on a rock near the point they were approaching. They were near enough for Rod

to be certain it was she and he waved his paddle and called.

But the girl did not answer. She remained perfectly still, watching them. There was no answering wave, no joyous response to his shout. Thoughts of weakness due to starvation, of a mind deranged by terror and exposure, came to Rod, and he and Henry fairly lifted the canoe from the water with each stroke.

With a swirl of his paddle, he brought the craft broadside to a strip of sand beach beneath Marian and leaped out as it grounded. He dropped his paddle and climbed the bank to her side, but his exultation vanished when he saw her face.

"Marian!" he exclaimed as he stepped closer. "You're safe!"

"Yes," she answered slowly, "and what are you doing here?"

In her tone there was an accusation so unmistakable that Rod stared in amazement.

"Doing! Searching for you. I've come to take you home."

"Don't, Rod," and there was a note of sadness in her voice. "It's all so useless. Don't make it any worse. I know the truth."

"The truth! What do you mean?"

"Are you going to make me say it?" she demanded. "It would be kinder if you would paddle on, out of my life, as you have gone out of my thoughts."

She turned her head away. For a moment sheer bewilderment kept Rod silent. Then he took a quick step forward.

"Marian," he began, "you don't——"

"Go away," she interrupted, "before I have to tell you what I think of you. You're not deceiving me at all. I understand everything you have done from the morning you substituted one of your tools for the canoeman Mr. Cron had chosen for us."

She slipped from the rock and stepped closer.

"I had hoped you wouldn't try to deceive me now," she went on bitterly. "Did you think you could decoy us up here, have our men desert us, make it necessary for Mr. Cron, who is responsible for our safety, to send his only assistants to search for us at a time when their absence may mean his financial ruin, and not have me suspect?"

"Is that what he——?" Rod began.

"Don't talk to me!" Her voice was near the breaking point. "You and your fur trade ethics! You and your code that permits such contemptible measures to win a few pieces of fur!

"Oh, I hate myself for thinking I ever saw anything else in you. I was a fool, a fool to believe this country bred men, that only big natures and clean spirits could survive in it. I was a simpering, sentimental imbecile, covering a vile land with beautiful colors. And to think that——"

Her passionate outburst had risen to the point where she could no longer control her voice. Rod

drew back in sheer stupefaction but when she stopped desperation forced him to speak.

"Tell me——" he began.

"Why tell you?" she demanded furiously. "You know it. You arranged to have those Indians bring us here with a false story of an old man who could tell father wonderful stories. You knew Mr. Cron was responsible for our safety, that when we did not return he would send his men to search for us, just at the time when they could not be spared. You subjected us to danger and indignity to gain an advantage over a poor cripple and now you come pretending to rescue us."

Rod stared for a moment, white-faced with anger.

"You believe that?" he asked coldly.

"Believe it!" Marian cried. "Why should I not believe it when the facts are plain? Ever since I arrived at Lake Deception you have degraded the beautiful thing I thought I had found. Preachers, cripples, half-breeds and women — they're the ones you dare fight."

Rod saw it all now — saw how cleverly Cron had used her and the strife between them. As never before he understood the relationship between Marian and himself. He knew her fury was great because she still cared, knew that, in lashing him with her contempt, the spirit that sought dominance was only punishing a love she could not destroy.

But even when he saw and understood, his purpose was not altered. Dominance no longer lay in

explanation or softening. It was too late for that.

"By God!" he exclaimed savagely. "I'll ——"

A look of horror in Marian's eyes stopped him. She was looking past him and he whirled in time to see Jim charging upon the unsuspecting Henry with an upraised ax.

Rod yelled an inarticulate warning and Henry turned and stumbled. The ax head missed him but the handle struck him behind the ear and he dropped to the ground. Jim leaped over his body and rushed on toward Rod, the ax swinging.

As Rod stopped to pick up a small boulder — his only available weapon — he comprehended the depths of The Spider's scheme. There had not been the single intention of getting him away from Lake Deception at a crucial time. Cron had sought other game, had planned a complete victory, had determined that once and for all he would end the Norwood rule by ending the last of the Norwoods.

Nearly three hundred miles from the railroad, in a district never penetrated by white men, with a well fortified story to prove his innocence, Aaron Cron believed he was playing safe. And he would play safe, Rod knew, if Jim got home one blow with that ax.

All this flashed across Rod's mind while the tall half-breed was charging across twenty feet of ground. An anger such as he had never known, not even when he looked down from the ridge to the place where his father had been killed, came

to Rod. But there also came a determination that he would not fail. He gripped the rock and turned as if to run.

But he swung completely around and as he faced Jim again, with the half-breed only a few feet distant, he let the rock fly with the full force of his whirling movement. It caught Jim on the chest. The man stopped, the breath left his lungs with a loud "woof!" and the ax fell to the ground from his relaxed fingers.

Rod charged at once, swinging both fists with savage, heedless fury. He was conscious only of one thing, of one resolve — that never again would this man be sent to kill him as he had been sent to kill Tom Norwood — that when this fight ended Jim would be dead.

Rod's very recklessness gave the half-breed an opportunity to recover his breath. He retreated, shielding his head with his arms, and Rod's blows glanced harmlessly from elbows and shoulders.

After a moment Rod realized this. His fury remained unabated but it was cold now. He brought Jim's arms down by battering at his stomach, then a swing caught the man on the jaw and staggered him. Rod, following up this advantage, rushed in with flying arms.

With Jim's appearance he had forgotten Marian. She drew back from the open space in which the two men fought — breathless, staring but uncringing, never looking away from the savage struggle.

Her heart was beating wildly, her cheeks were flushed, her lips were parted and her eyes wide with fascination.

And then Jim, desperate with fear, carried the attack to Rod. As at Lake Deception, he came forward with his long arms extended, his white teeth clenched, his dark face set. Taller and heavier, he bore down upon the white man, trying to smother the blows, to reach inside those darting fists and grasp the body.

Sometimes he succeeded. Once Rod went down with Jim on top. Back and forth they fought, hurling each other against brush and windfalls, tripping over rocks, slipping on the moss, but always rushing back.

Rod was beginning to tire and he saw no abatement in Jim's onslaughts. The thought cooled him. He ceased swinging wildly, began slowly to retreat and then, when the half-breed pressed his advantage, Rod met his charge with a straight blow to the heart. It was carefully timed, his whole weight was behind it, and Jim went down.

Instantly Rod was upon him, battering at his face until Jim covered it with his arms. Kneeling astride his adversary's chest, Rod glanced up into Marian's eyes.

"Get my rifle!" he commanded sharply. "In the canoe."

She did not move or speak.

"Get it!" he said sternly.

Rod gripped Jim by the throat with both hands and held him. Again he looked up.

"Get my rifle from the canoe," he repeated.

His eyes held hers and there, with the half-breed struggling frantically beneath him, they fought it out. In the end Marian was the first to look away.

"Go get it!" Rod commanded.

She turned and ran down to the strip of sand, drew the weapon from the canoe and started up the bank. At the top she faltered.

"Hurry!" Rod called, but she dropped the rifle and covered her face with her hands.

"Jim," Rod said, "you remember that swamp — near Kashabowie — last spring — the deadfall?"

The effect upon the half-breed was terrific. He struggled like a caged, trapped creature — so desperately Rod saw that he could not hold him — that with his bare hands he could not conquer his heavier and now frantic opponent. He worked himself into an advantageous position, then leaped to his feet and darted toward Marian.

As he picked up the rifle he whirled. Jim had followed, was almost upon him, and Rod pulled the trigger. The half-breed fell forward at his feet.

As Rod pumped a fresh cartridge into the barrel he looked at Marian. He was gasping for breath. His face was scratched and streaming with blood. His clothes were torn. He swayed slightly on his feet. But his eyes glowed with a fierce light.

"You — you've killed him!" Marian gasped.

Rod laughed exultantly and bent over Jim. The man was dead.

"That's one," he said with a smile as he turned back to the girl. "There are two more."

Marian stared dumbly at Rod, but did not speak again.

The savage smile faded from the young man's bloody face. With a sigh, he turned his attention to the still unconscious Henry.

23

When Rod brought a kettle of water from the lake he found Henry sitting up and looking around in a dazed manner.

"Lucky you stumbled when you turned," Rod said as he offered the boy a drink. "Head pretty sore?"

"Who did it?" the half-breed asked.

"Jim. He's dead."

Rod bent to examine the big lump above Henry's ear and then helped him to his feet. But the youth swayed dizzily and would have fallen had not Rod caught him.

"Can I do anything?" Marian asked.

"We might as well take him to your camp," was the reply. "He'll be able to travel in a day or two and then we can start home. I'll help him down to the canoe."

He stooped to lift Henry and then suddenly straightened and confronted Marian.

"Is that other man of The Spider's on the island?" he demanded harshly.

"Who?" she faltered.

"Bapinini, 'The Laughing Man.' Have you seen him?"

"No."

"Sure?"

"I've told you he is not here!" she cried indignantly.

"I know, but you didn't tell me Jim was here."

"But I never dreamed——"

"Of course you didn't!" Rod interrupted savagely. "You were too busy telling what you think of me. Do you give me your word Bapinini's not on this island?"

She did not answer but silence only hardened Rod.

"How long had Jim been here?" he demanded.

"He came the day we were abandoned on this island."

"Then why haven't you left?"

"Those Indians stole his canoe that night."

Rod started.

"You mean that he has been here ever since you have?" he asked.

"He hasn't been able to get away or we would have been back at Lake Deception."

"Of course," Rod grinned. "That's stupid of me."

He understood now. The Spider had devised a clever scheme. Jim had been marooned with the Ransoms, not to assist them, but to give the appearance of an attempt at rescue, to convince Marian that Rod had been at the bottom of the desertion of the

two Indian canoemen and, most of all, to see that Rod never returned to Lake Deception.

And Rod believed, too, that Bapinini was not far away. The two had left the rice harvest in a single canoe. They had undoubtedly circled north to the Otoskwin River together. It would be necessary for them to be there to make certain the Indians deserted the Ransoms and later to attend to Rod. Jim had remained on the island. Bapinini was probably somewhere near — probably had been stationed up the river after leaving Jim, canoeless, with the Ransoms.

Again Rod grinned, and he turned to look across the lake, toward the mouth of the stream. There was nothing in sight and he studied the nearest shores. Marian watched him for a few minutes and then turned to the brush.

"Where are you going?" he asked brusquely, as she started away.

"I had left father with Jim," she answered. "I am going back to him."

"Better come with me," he said. "I'll take Henry down there. Might as well camp together."

Marian hesitated. Since Jim had been killed the color had left her cheeks, her head was not held so high.

"I want to get back as quickly as possible," she said.

"I'll get you there soon enough," he replied indifferently. "It will take only a minute."

He helped Henry to his feet and to the canoe.

"Bring the rifle," he called to Marian.

She hesitated a moment and then picked up the weapon and walked down the bank. Rod had placed the injured half-breed in the center and he now motioned Marian to the bow. He shoved off and he took a paddle and timed her strokes with his.

"Your camp is on the other side, isn't it?" Rod asked as they approached the north end.

"Yes," she answered.

"Not far across though?"

"No."

"Then I'll land here."

He looked out over the lake for a full minute as the canoe drifted past a little point and into a small cove. Marian turned to watch him.

"Are you looking for another victim?" she asked coldly.

"Perhaps," he answered as he shoved the canoe shoreward. "We'll get out here."

He brought the canoe up beside a flat rock and held it while Marian got out. Then he lifted Henry ashore.

"Poor devil," he muttered, as the half-breed lay with his eyes closed. "But I don't believe he can be badly hurt."

At his most evident expression of concern and sympathy Marian glanced at him in amazement, started to speak, then stopped and turned into the brush. In a moment she came back.

"I wish you wouldn't say anything to father about — about Jim," she said. "It will only upset him, perhaps make him worse."

"Of course not," Rod agreed warmly. "What seems to be the matter with him?"

"I don't think it is anything but worry over me. He thought he was responsible, in a way, for what happened — that he shouldn't have brought me. Then, we have not had much food."

"I'll fix that right away!" Rod exclaimed, as he sprang to his feet. "I brought plenty because I didn't know how long I would be hunting you. Show me the way."

Marian went ahead. The island was less than a hundred yards across. As they came in sight of the tents, pitched in a small opening near the shore, the girl halted.

"You won't say anything to disturb father?" she asked.

"I suppose you've told him all you've told me — about how I am responsible for this?" Rod countered.

"He heard Jim's story."

"How would it be for me to keep out of sight, then? I can pitch our tent back here. Later, you can break it to him gently that I'm here and we're going out as soon as Henry can travel."

"That would be better," Marian agreed, and she went on toward the camp.

Rod returned, unloaded the canoe, hid the craft in

the brush quite a distance from the water, and then went back to the injured half-breed.

"Think you can walk?" he asked. "I want to get camp made before dark."

"Me try," Henry muttered.

Rod assisted him to his feet and, half carrying, half dragging, got him across to the place he had selected. He set the youth down with his back to a tree and then carried over the duffle and the food. A half hour later camp was made and Henry was comfortably installed on a thick bough bed. There was a great lump on the side of his head but Rod satisfied himself there was no serious injury. He had been struck only a glancing blow.

Because he had feared Marian and her father might suffer starvation before he found them, Rod had brought a supply of the best food in the post and after Henry had been cared for he prepared a meal suitable for an invalid. When it was nearly ready he went to the edge of the opening and whistled softly. Marian came out of a tent and crossed to him.

"I have something ready for your father," he said. "I'll bring it to you here."

He turned and hurried back, but Marian followed him to his camp. He gave no heed to her presence until he had lifted two kettles from the fire.

"That's for him," he said. "I'll have your own supper ready in a few minutes and bring it to you."

She took the kettles and turned away without a

word. A little later Rod carried a heaping plate and a kettle of tea to the Ransom camp. Marian came to meet him.

"How short of grub have you been?" he asked. "You don't look starved."

"We started half-rations three days ago," she answered. "I'm all right."

He turned back without comment. Marian hesitated and then called.

"Have you had your supper?" she asked.

"I'll eat it now," he answered without looking back.

"Rod!" she cried.

There was a pleading note in her voice that stopped him.

"Why don't you — there must be some reason — you haven't attempted to explain."

"Explain what?" he demanded coldly.

"All this — all that's happened."

"Why should I? You seem so sure of your own explanation. I told you once that I don't have to explain myself," and he hurried on to his camp.

There he fed Henry some broth and ate his own supper. It was dark when he washed the dishes. He poured a little water over the dying fire, took his rifle and slipped through the brush.

First he made his way noiselessly to the Ransom camp. Marian was sitting close to a fire in front of her father's tent. The night was cold and she leaned forward, her hands spread to the blaze. Rod

could see her face in the red light of the flames and all the assurance and cold contemptuousness were gone.

He watched her for a long time. She rarely moved. Not once did she lift her head, nor did her expression change. At last she arose, built up the fire and went into her father's tent. Evidently the professor was asleep, for she returned at once, walking softly. She stood before the fire for a moment and then started toward her own tent.

The girl halted abruptly. Rod, too, had heard a low hiss from the brush on the other side. Marian looked, listened a moment and then asked in a low voice, "Who is it?"

A shadow seemed to separate from a spruce trunk and Bapinini, carrying a rifle, stepped into the firelight.

"Where Jim?" he asked.

"Hush!" she whispered, glancing anxiously toward Rod's camp and then pointing to the professor's tent. "Father is sick."

The half-breed came forward to the fire, glancing cautiously at the shadows surrounding it.

"Where Jim?" he repeated.

He was standing before the fire now, the light shining on his face. Though Rod had seen the man through a telescope many times during the summer, this was his first opportunity to distinguish his features.

He had once been cut with a knife. The scars ran

from the corners of his mouth and distorted his face into a foolish grin that became the more fatuous with increased seriousness. Yet the expression of sottish mirth failed to hide a look of cunning. Rather, it emphasized a furtive, treacherous aspect, revealed something repulsive.

Marian came close to the other side of the fire and looked at him.

"Bapinini," she began tensely, "did Mr. Cron send you to look for us?"

"Sure. Ten days now me been traveling all time. Where Jim?"

"Has Jim been looking for us, too?" she persisted.

He started and looked at her suspiciously.

"You no see Jim?" he asked. "You no see anybody looking for you?"

"What did Mr. Cron tell you?"

Again he searched her face mistrustfully before he answered.

"He tell us you lost. He say those hunters leave you some place. He say he get into trouble you no come back and we go find you. But Jim he come this way first. You no see Jim?"

"Yes," Marian answered slowly, "Jim came. Those Indians stole his canoe. He's here now. He's — he's at the other end of the island."

Immediately Bapinini relaxed. He looked around the camp.

"You got much grub?" he asked.

"A little. Are you hungry?"

"No. Me eat supper up river little ways. Then it get dark and me see fire here. Think it be you and come over. But say," and he was tense again, "you no see anybody else? Indian, white man, go by here in canoe, to-day?"

Marian shook her head and again she glanced toward Rod's camp. She remembered what Rod had said that afternoon following Jim's death. "That's one. There are two more." Somehow she must get this man away.

"No see any canoe?" Bapinini insisted.

"Hush!" Marian warned. "Father is very ill. He must not be disturbed. Can't you go —— ?"

"But where Jim?" the half-breed demanded. "That his camp?" and he pointed to a third tent near the shore. "He come back pretty soon, eh? Me wait."

He laid his rifle against a windfall, squatted beside the fire and began to whittle a plug of tobacco. Marian glanced quickly about, listened for a sound from Rod's camp.

"You can't stay here!" she burst forth. "You must ——"

She stopped at a sound behind her. Rod had leaped into the clearing, rifle in hand, and was running towards them.

"Don't move, Bapinini," he said in a low voice. "I'll kill you if you do."

Marian whirled to confront him. The half-breed

started to rise, but remained motionless as he saw Rod's rifle, then slowly squatted again.

"Rod!" Marian cried desperately. "Don't ——"

"Keep quiet!" he commanded. "And step back to the other side of the fire. Bapinini, stand up. Drop your knife and turn your back to me. There. Now don't move."

Marian started forward. She was trembling with anger.

"Rod," she began again.

"Go back there and sit down," he interrupted.

There was a quality in his voice she had never heard before and it stopped her. He was facing the fire and she saw that his face was white, his lips tightly pressed, and in his eyes was a light that terrified her. They told of an unalterable purpose, of a savage joy, and when she did not obey they flashed with sudden excitement.

"I warn you now," he said, "that there is to be no interference with anything I do. If there is, I will tie your hands and feet."

He walked over to Bapinini and poked his rifle into the man's back.

"This gun is cocked," he said coldly. "If you do anything except what I tell you, I'll pull the trigger. Do you understand that?"

There was no answer. Rod prodded the half-breed with the muzzle.

"Understand what I mean?" he demanded.

There was a grunt of assent from Bapinini.

"Rod, you — you beast!" Marian gasped.

He gave no indication that he had heard.

"Now, Bapinini," he continued, "walk over to that tree and sit down with your back to it."

He pointed with his rifle and the half-breed obeyed.

"Put your hands behind the tree," Rod commanded. "There. Hold them that way."

He bent over and lashed the man's wrists together with a leather thong, working slowly, making certain they could not be loosened. Then he tied a thong around each of Bapinini's ankles and fastened them to a windfall. After testing all the bonds he went back to the fire and threw on more wood.

"Why don't you give him a chance?" Marian cried furiously. "You've killed one unarmed man to-day."

He looked up but did not seem to see or hear her. Then he bent and placed a frying pan in the fire, thrusting it into the coals. When it was arranged to his satisfaction he still squatted there on his heels, staring into the blaze.

Marian watched him with growing fascination. His face was still white. The jaw muscles were knotted. The firelight and its deep shadows brought each feature into sharp relief, etching grim lines.

But there was strength behind that grimness as he crouched in his rigid pose, watching the frying pan turn from black to dull red, then to a rose glow.

Yet most of all she recognized a purpose. It seemed a stern, implacable, tangible thing, against which she might beat in vain, against which she would be powerless.

As she recognized her helplessness, Marian sank down with a despairing sigh. She sensed the impending tragedy in silence. Nothing that she could say would halt the horrid drama being enacted before her.

24

Rod arose to his feet at last, grasped Marian's two wrists and circled them with the fingers of his left hand. With his right he drew the frying pan from the fire.

"Come on," he said, and he dragged her to "The Laughing Man," where he sat tied to the tree.

In a sudden frenzy Marian struggled to free herself, but Rod dragged her on as if she had been a child. When they reached the half-breed he turned savagely.

"Be quiet," he commanded. "I want you to keep your head. Listen to everything. Don't forget."

He stooped until his eyes were level with the prisoner's, drew Marian down beside him, and then slowly he brought the now faintly glowing frying pan close to Bapinini's feet.

"Is there anything you want to say?" he asked in a low, steady voice.

The odor of scorching moosehide came to Marian's nostrils. She saw Bapinini's leg twitch.

"You fiend!" she cried. "Oh, don't — don't make me hate you any more."

Rod's eyes never shifted from the half-breed's. His grasp of the girl's wrists did not relax. The odor of scorching moosehide grew more acrid. There had been a despairing, agonized plea in Marian's voice but he remained unconscious of it.

"Is there anything you want to say?" Rod repeated.

Bapinini did not speak. His horribly scarred face gave no sign.

"Jim is on the island," Rod told him. "Jim has talked."

Bapinini winced then and his eyes widened. Rod arose and went back to the fire, where he again thrust the frying pan into the coals. He dragged Marian with him but when he started back she resisted.

"Please!" she begged. "Don't kill everything."

As before, he ignored her and drew her with him to the half-breed's side, where he knelt on the ground, forcing Marian down beside him.

"Jim says you set the deadfall," he began abruptly.

"Jim lie!" Bapinini exclaimed fiercely.

"Jim says he only went with you, that he stayed in camp while you went over the ridge. And I saw the tracks. Only one man was near the poplar in the swamp."

For the first time Bapinini strained at his bonds. His scarred face became more horrible in his rage. The grin was now a ghastly thing, mocking the passion that burned in his dark eyes.

"Be still!" Rod commanded sharply. "Jim told his story. He said you were the man. I was there. I saw the tracks. I know everything that happened. I know which man tells the truth. Do you want to tell your story or——" He nodded his head toward the fire, but Bapinini did not speak.

"I'll get the truth if I have to burn your legs off to the knees!" Rod exclaimed savagely.

For a time there was a silence, broken only by the crackling of spruce wood in the fire behind them. Marian no longer struggled but sank quietly to her knees beside Rod, unconscious now of the firm grip that imprisoned her wrists.

She looked quickly from one man to the other, saw the battle of wills, the fear that drove Bapinini to resistance, the purpose that impelled Rod. In that moment she knew nothing she might do or say could sway him — knew that he was capable of the fiendish torture of a helpless man.

She glanced about her, at the black spruce pressing close around the little opening, at the red light of the fire, the dark sky overhead. She knew a dead man lay at the other end of the island, an injured man slept near, that all about them was the wilderness, empty, threatening — a fitting background for the savage drama before her.

"Shall I get the frying pan?" Rod asked, as his prisoner writhed in silence.

"Ehe-bik kill me if I speak!" Bapinini exclaimed,

his terror so great he forgot English and spoke in Ojibwa.

"Only white man's talk!" Rod said sharply. "She must hear. And do not be afraid of Ehe-bik."

Bapinini relapsed into sullen silence. Thought of the white woman hearing him had killed his terror.

"Shall I get the frying pan?" Rod persisted, still in that same cold tone.

"What you going to do?" Bapinini countered, and his fear was returning.

"I'm going to hear your story first. This is your last chance. Talk now or I'll make you."

The man considered this for a moment. Rod rose to his feet.

"I tell," Bapinini cried out.

"Don't forget the truth," Rod threatened. "I can tell when you lie. There is Jim's story, and what I know."

"Me tell it right," Bapinini promised eagerly.

"Listen, now," and for the first time Rod seemed aware of Marian's presence. "I wish your father were well enough to hear this, too. But it won't matter in the end. Go ahead, Bapinini."

"Last winter me work at Mattawa same as always," the half-breed began at once. "The Spider, he send Jim for me New Year time and me go to Deception. The Spider, he never tell me why. He never say anything. One month, two month, pretty near three month, go by. Me no work, no do anything. Then one day Jim say, 'Get your dog

team.' We go away. West one day, then north. Then we stop — and make camp.

"That night it begin snow. In the morning Jim go away alone. He take ax and he tell me wait. Noon he come back. Me think then we go, but we stay there all time it snow. Three days. Then another day. Next morning after that Jim go away again. Pretty soon he come back and we go west. We stop and buy some fur from two hunters and ——"

"Wait!" Rod commanded sharply. "Only the frying pan will make you tell the truth. What was Jim doing?"

"He no say," was the stubborn response.

"Tell it!" Rod exclaimed savagely.

"When he come back that last time he grin and he say, 'I guess that Tom Norwood never buy any more fur'."

Rod's fingers contracted about Marian's wrists, but she was unaware of the pain. She glanced at his face, saw it was contorted by murderous fury, and for the first time she began to understand. Bapinini pressed back against the tree as if to escape what he saw in the white man's eyes.

"You grinning fool!" Rod burst forth at last. "I'll use the pan if you tell another lie."

"Jim he say that," was the terrified protest.

"Yes, but you knew what he was doing. You knew before you left Lake Deception. Tell it."

Falteringly, sometimes defensively and sometimes

with startling revelation, the half-breed told how The Spider had given them orders to set the deadfall for Tom Norwood, how they had waited two months for the opportunity, and how they believed they had done their foul work without leaving a trace.

Marian, who had not caught the full significance of his first statement, drew back in horror as the tale was unfolded.

"Rod! Rod!" she moaned. "Why did you let me think such terrible things of you?"

But Rod did not hear.

"Now!" he exclaimed when Bapinini had finished. "How about the time Jim came down to the Indian camp this summer?"

"Me with brigade this summer. Me not at Lake Deception."

"No, but what did you hear? Quick or I'll burn the feet off of you."

"Jim tell me. Ehe-bik send him down to have fight with you. Ehe-bik think Jim lick you easy."

"That all?"

"Well, Ehe-bik tell him to take knife and kill you."

"And now, this trip. Tell it."

Slowly and with much prompting, Bapinini related the story much as Rod had deduced it. The half-breed was completely unnerved. The natural reticence of the Indian had broken down before a fear which, Rod saw, was more of The Spider than of anything else. He gave details which never could

have been wrung from him if he had been given time to become accustomed to the situation.

"Which one of you was to kill me?" Rod demanded when he had finished.

"Ehe-bik, he tell me to do it but when we leave Deception, Jim say he do it," was the reply. "He want to because you beat him before Indians."

Rod had loosened Marian's wrists long before but she had not moved from his side. Now he relaxed for the first time.

"I thought so," he said. "The Spider wanted to have a killing against each of you. How many murders are you fellows responsible for? Why did you work for Cron if you had to do his dirty jobs?"

"Ehe-bik, he devil."

"Nonsense! You know better than to believe that *windigo* business."

"Me no believe he *windigo*. He fool hunters with that story. But Ehe-bik devil just the same."

Bapinini strained at his bonds and his scarred face became horrible with passion.

"He kill my father, that Ehe-bik!" he cried. "With his hands, just his hands. Me see him do it. Just because he want my mother. He devil-man. Two hunters me know he kill because they not bring him all their fur. With his hands. He devil. No man like him. No man can do what he do. Me know he do this. Jim and me tie rocks to those Indians in night and sink 'em in the lake."

Neither Rod nor Marian spoke. The girl crouched

there, the firelight touching parts of her white face and intensifying the expression of horror, as Bapinini's tale unfolded.

"The Laughing Man" babbled on. Fear and hatred of The Spider had loosened his tongue. His words became a chronicle of Aaron Cron's ruthless sway over the hunters of Mattawa, of oppression and cruelty. Without realizing what he was doing, the half-breed also gave a picture of the perversion of a strong character, showed how an indomitable will had grown in the isolation of the wilderness to a thing of heedless greed. Power and the love of power, that liberty with which the north tempts its people to arrogance, these had undermined the strong spirit that had survived the gory drama of the old squaw's wigwam and made of it a horrible, pitiless thing.

As Marian listened, as she grasped the fundamentals beneath the broken, lurid description of the warping of Aaron Cron's soul, she saw the north as it really is, an implacable force often seducing that it may deride, offering little and demanding much, exposing and fostering weakness, scoffing at strength and placing countless obstacles in its way but rewarding it in the end — that was the north that lay beneath the many-hued mantle with which her imagination had once clothed it.

The north, she saw, was not so much a place of flashing valor as of quiet courage. It was a testing ground more than a battlefield, as is life everywhere,

with meager outward rewards, scarcely more than ease of soul and consciousness of strength.

A little furtively, with awe and with understanding, she looked at Rod. She knew the whole story now, understood his purpose and his tenacity. She saw, too, that she had come second in his thoughts, that she had been thrust into the background, and she exulted that it was so.

But even when he knew she must understand, Rod did not look at her. He was listening intently to every word Bapinini said and when at last the half-breed's passion had burned out and he ceased straining against his bonds, Rod did not move. He crouched there while the minutes dragged and, deeper than ever before, rage carved the lines in his face. Marian knew he fought a battle but just what it was or how it was decided she did not understand.

Rod suddenly arose to his feet. "Can you write down what you have heard, to-night?" he asked. "Before you forget details?"

"Yes," Marian said.

"All right," and he turned away toward his own camp.

"Where Jim?" Bapinini called after him.

"He's gone back," Rod answered. "He won't bother you."

Marian went into her tent, got paper and pencil and returned to the fire. She had been writing for some time before Rod finally appeared from the shore where Bapinini had landed. He went at once

to the half-breed, cut his bonds and drove him with a rifle down to the water. Marian heard them get into a canoe and paddle away.

A half hour later Rod came back. The girl was still writing and looked up as he strode into the firelight.

"You needn't worry about anything to-night," he said. "I've marooned Bapinini on a small island north of here. He'll stay there until we're ready to start. When do you think your father can travel?"

"He's much better," she said. "That supper — and he's sleeping well for the first time. Perhaps in a day or two."

He did not comment but stood staring into the fire. Marian leaned forward, was about to speak. There was a great deal she wanted to say. She had a desire to prostrate herself. There were countless things she had said to this man which she wished to efface from his memory if possible. There were other things she wished to tell him. There was a sentence she wished to hear him speak.

But when she searched his stern features, saw the hard, absent expression of his eyes, her courage failed. She remembered the things she had said to him that day. A sinking sensation swept over her, when she recalled his indifference even to her scorn. She knew he was not thinking of her, was scarcely aware of her presence.

He turned and walked to his own camp without speaking.

In the days that followed she could come no closer to him than that. There was a savage intensity in everything he said or did. He was obsessed, driven, and he drove the others.

Professor Ransom gained strength amazingly when he learned his daughter was safe and after he had eaten a few good meals. Henry's dizziness quickly disappeared. He was able to help Rod bury Jim the next day and the morning of the third day Bapinini was brought from his island and the journey to Lake Deception began.

"I'll take the prisoner," Rod explained to Marian. "Henry will paddle you and your father."

It was only thus that he ever spoke to her, some short comment or explanation. Not once did she find an opportunity to get through the wall he seemed to have erected between them, and after the first day of travel she did not try.

But Marian found a fierce joy in that journey. She paddled stroke for stroke with Henry, keeping her canoe abreast of Rod's, paddled until her arms and back seemed to shriek their agony and blood stained the paddle shaft. She carried all her own dunnage on the portages, helped prepare the meals and wash the dishes.

Sometimes she worked beside Rod, bending over a cooking fire or struggling against a head wind. She thrilled to his presence then, as she had that day in the early summer when they were with the brigade. There was a suffocating entrancement in the thought

that they shared something, though it were only the menial task of clearing up after a meal.

She gloried even in the fact that he never seemed aware of her presence, that the driving obsession still held him. She arose stiffly but gladly at his call, long before daylight. She forced her little tent to a wobbly position on wavering poles, that the day's journey might be lengthened and a quick camp made.

Not until they were only half a day from home did Rod draw her aside. He was haggard now and his eyes burned more fiercely than ever.

"You and Andy Parr and Bapinini are the only ones who know," he began abruptly. "I never told Beth. She never even knew about the wolves——"

He paused a moment and moistened his lips.

"I don't know what will happen," he said at last. "I think things will go through all right but you never can tell with a man like The Spider. But if he should get me I want you to take that story to Port Arthur. It's what I'm planning on. It's what I decided from the first. I had to whittle him down. I had to break him. I had to kill his power over his men to get that confession. Cron must hang. Understand? He must hang. Any other way is too easy, for me and for him.

"Jim's dead but he was only a tool. Bapinini told the truth, I'm sure. And he'll turn Queen's evidence. I've talked to him, explained it. He has agreed. He sees it's the only way out and he's in terror of Cron.

"We'll get home to-morrow noon. I'll take every precaution. But if anything happens, if The Spider gets me, I want you to take that story and Andy Parr to the authorities at Port Arthur. They'll do the rest. Will you promise that?"

"Yes," she answered simply.

Her arms ached for him. He stood there so close and yet with an indefinite distance between them. But she made no move, no sign. Joy enough had come to her in that moment. Even though she had been the only one to whom he could turn, he *had* turned to her.

25

The morning Rod and Beth parted, the girl to go on westward to Black Sturgeon and Andy Parr's protection, her brother northward to his search, two Indians acquired added notions of the vagaries of the white race.

At Lake Deception they had been forced against their own wishes to make the journey. It was outfitting time. They were anxious to get away to their hunting camps. Yet a resistless young white man, with threats and promises of double pay, had compelled them to hurry to the post and begin the five-day paddle.

Now, when they had just received added instructions from the young trader whose face was so hard and whose eyes were so threatening, when they had seen him depart over the portage with Henry and had themselves settled to the long days of toil, the young white girl who sat in their canoe suddenly commanded them to stop.

"I have changed my mind," she said. "I do not want to go to Black Sturgeon. Go around this island, cross over to the other shore, follow that for a ways. And hurry. We must be home by noon."

They hesitated only a moment. The threatening eyes of the young trader would not look upon them again until spring. They wished to go back, get their outfits and their families and depart for the winter's work. Besides, they had been paid in advance.

At noon Beth's canoe rounded the point on which stood the Norwood post. She saw a number of hunters gathered outside the Cron establishment. Cron himself was sitting on a bench beside the door talking to them. A few were standing in front of the Norwood trade shop.

George Paul saw her coming and met her at the shore.

"Roddy, he say you go to Black Sturgeon!" he exclaimed reprovingly. "You fool to come back here."

George was angry as well as indignant. He had devised a plan of his own which he intended to put into execution that night.

"What's happened?" Beth demanded, ignoring his manner and his statement. "Has The Spider outfitted any hunters yet?"

"No, but last night he send his man down to camp. This morning there lot of talk."

"And you haven't outfitted anyone?"

"Just two yesterday. To-day they not do anything."

He was clearly bewildered by this turn of events but Beth seemed delighted. She hurried on up to

the trade shop, threw open the door, called the hunters in and went behind the counter.

"I don't know what Ehe-bik is telling you," she began at once in Ojibwa, "but I do know it is lies. The Norwoods have always been here, and they always will be. We will outfit our hunters this fall and we will take care of them this winter."

She turned to the shelves behind her, selected a suit of "store clothes" and walked around to the front of the counter.

"Big man, big suit," she laughed, holding the coat out to a tall Indian. "Put that on. Here," and she gave him the vest, "this goes first."

There was something infectious in her laughter. The big hunter grinned, wriggled into the unaccustomed garment and then put on the coat. The others laughed, too, derisively but enviously. She held out the trousers and they roared with laughter.

"You like it?" Beth asked.

The question was superfluous. Nothing could have wiped the ecstatic grin from the big fellow's face. He nodded his head.

"All right," Beth said brusquely. "Give it here."

Reluctantly he took off the coat and vest and laid them on the counter.

"Listen," the girl said sharply. "I will give you that suit of clothes when you have taken your outfit. Every hunter will get a suit when he has been given his 'debt.' But only if you get all your 'debt' here. If I see any man near Ehe-bik's post

he will not get a suit. Now go. I will eat but soon I will be back. Then you can get your outfits."

That was a bit of added strategy. She knew the hunters would go back to their encampment and that by the time the trade shop was reopened every hunter at the post would know about the promised gift of the suits.

She ate a hurried meal and took George back to the trade shop with her. She also had a whispered conference with Jane as a result of which she knew that sharp eyes would watch every movement made at The Spider's post that afternoon and report them instantly to her.

From George and from the Indian book she got the rating of each hunter and when at last she opened the door she knew exactly how much "debt" should be advanced to each.

Few fur traders have ever worked so hard or so fast as did Beth in the four days that followed. Outfitting an Ojibwa hunter is an exasperatingly tedious process. He consumes hours in the choice of essentials, changes his mind continually, is hectored and coerced by his wife, is always counting and recounting the little wooden paddles that serve as currency and becomes almost hysterical in his purchasing when only a few are left.

Beth was quick, brusque and yet careful never to offend their sensitive feelings. She jested just enough to keep them good humored, flattered and cajoled, and always she saw to it that each man re-

ceived all the necessities in clothing and equipment.

From dawn to dark of the shortening days she was busy in the trade shop, and from dark to dawn she and George Paul and Jane alternated in standing guard. Reports came from The Spider's post, stories of a man so mad with rage no one dared speak to him. He and his half-breed assistant, the man from Mattawa who had taken Jim's place, remained alone in their trade shop during the day. Not a hunter visited them.

But The Spider was not idle. Each night his half-breed went to the encampment and talked to the hunters. He started rumor after rumor, stories which cost Beth valuable time because it was necessary to refute them patiently.

Just before dawn of the third morning, when Beth stood shivering in the dark shadow of the warehouse, fighting drowsiness, she was startled by a rustling sound directly in front. The sky was cloudy, the darkness intense, and she could see nothing except the outline of the trade shop.

She waited, breathless, gripping her rifle, and then there came the unmistakable sound of the scratch of a match and a tiny flare that silhouetted a man bending over a pile of birch bark and pine kindling banked against the rear door of the trade shop. Beth's first thought was that she had been asleep.

The flames leaped as the birch bark caught. In the increased light she saw the man jump to his feet and run.

The girl lifted her rifle. It was an instinctive movement. Even as she pressed the trigger there was no calculation. Rather there was a vicious pressure on the trigger, as if she could add force to the bullet.

For Beth was a Norwood, with all the pride and courage and sense of right instilled by a century of fur land strife. Her family, the monument to its achievement, the effort of two generations and the hope of a third, were being assailed by a sneaking half-breed. She could not have shot more readily at a wolf.

The man stumbled but before she could throw in another cartridge he had disappeared in the darkness. Beth ran forward and kicked at the blazing birch bark. With the butt of her rifle she dashed it from the door. She was just clearing away the last and stamping out the flames when George and Jane, who had been sleeping in the trade shop, ran around the corner.

The two half-breeds were hysterical with excitement.

"Now I do it!" George cried, when he learned what had happened. "All time Roddy he say no. He say he do it. He say wait. But Roddy damn fool. That Ehe-bik he kill him, he kill you, just like he kill Tom Norwood. But now I fix him."

He took the rifle from Beth's hands.

"George!" the girl commanded. "Come back here! What are you talking about? Tell me."

The story came out piecemeal, for George and his wife suddenly realized that in their excitement they had disobeyed Rod, but Beth's quick mind leaped ahead, and also back through the summer. She understood now many of the things Rod had said and done, the reasons back of them, the fight he had made and the purpose of it, the efforts to shield her.

"Give me that rifle," she commanded at the end. "Go back to sleep. If Rod said to wait, we'll wait. He knows."

There was a new intensity in the girl's work in the trade shop that day. Tears never came, even when she was alone in the evening. Horrible as were these new facts relative to her father's death, they were outweighed by what Rod had done, by his care and consideration, and by the significance and importance of the present struggle.

She won, so far as the hunters were concerned. Her gift of a suit to each man, her fairness to each, the skill and resoluteness with which she undermined the vicious rumors The Spider set in circulation, all these helped. A week after her return the last Indian had received his winter's supplies and departed. Not a wigwam remained at the head of the bay. The Norwood post was victorious.

Beth, George Paul and Jane were left alone. They had little to fear now. Across the bay The Spider was helpless. His half-breed had been wounded by Beth the night he tried to set fire to the warehouse

— how badly was not known. Only Ellen, Jim's wife, was able to carry water and wood and cook meals.

For a day Beth was busy getting the Indian book in shape, rearranging goods on the shelves, preparing everything for Rod's return. She wanted to have the post in perfect order, to surprise him with a clean slate, as well as a complete victory.

But when her duties were exhausted, when nothing but idleness and the nightly guard duty remained, the girl began to lose her confidence. She had already guessed what the absence of Jim and Bapinini meant. She knew that The Spider had determined to win over Rod, as he had over their father.

Rod had been gone nine days now. What was happening up there in the north, one hundred, perhaps two hundred, miles farther into the wilderness, she could not even guess. And she could do nothing to help her brother. She would gladly have sent George and Jane to search for him but saw the futility of it. Whatever The Spider had planned had been done or frustrated. She could only wait.

Each day she sat in the trade shop watching The Spider's post and the lake beyond. She seldom spoke. George and Jane walked silently in and out, stopping to look over her shoulder. They had tried to be encouraging at first but after twelve days they, too, lost hope.

With the girl's mounting despair there grew a fierce, passionate hatred. Much of the Norwood

history had been made clear in the last week. She saw how the men had always shielded their women. Even when he faced bankruptcy her father had continued to send more money than she needed at college, never letting her guess he was troubled. Rod, abandoning the thing he loved, had adopted Tom Norwood's policy, had striven to save her even from the horror of her father's death.

Now the trader across the bay, the man with the legless body and the more horribly crippled soul, had struck down Tom Norwood, then Rod. Or he was trying to, might even now have succeeded. He had endeavored to wipe out this line of men who protected their women, and as she sat there a thought came to her, a thought that grew and brought the fierce light of anticipation to her eyes. The Norwood men might be gone but a Norwood remained.

There was no wavering in the girl's determination. She was of the north and the north's ways were hers. As she saw it, there was no alternative, nothing else for her to do but exact Norwood vengeance. Even a night alone in her room brought no weakening. She only waited until the time should come.

And then the whole matter was wiped temporarily from Beth's mind. Just before the noon meal that day, Rod and his party arrived. George and Jane were in the kitchen, Beth in the dining room, and the two canoes slipped up to the point without being seen. Beth's first knowledge of their presence came when she heard footsteps on the veranda.

They all came in, Marian, her father, Rod, Henry and Bapinini. Rod carried his rifle. He was taking no chances with the half-breed, knowing what the man's fear of Cron would be now that he was so close to his employer.

But Beth saw none of them except Rod. She had only half hoped in the last few days and now the reaction came. She threw herself into his arms, laughing and sobbing.

Rod was dumbfounded to find her there. He looked accusingly at George and Jane, who came running into the room. He asked questions — questions answered only by George's broad grin and Beth's smile, so brilliant because it shone through tears.

Then they, too, asked questions, mingling them with broken statements. Beth suddenly turned to Marian and hugged her ecstatically and the two girls chattered, heedless of the others.

Rod alone remained cool. The hard, driving spirit which had carried him through the search and the subsequent events was unaffected by the hysteria around him. He motioned Bapinini into a far corner and told him to sit down in a chair. Then he dragged Jane to one side and asked when Beth had returned.

Only in the woman's excited and jumbled account of the last two weeks did he forget his surroundings. He listened, asked many questions, shook Jane's shoulder to force intelligible replies and, in his horror of what Beth had risked, her lack of protection from

The Spider, he was released for the first time from the purpose which had become an obsession.

"Why did you let her stay?" he demanded angrily, shouting above the babble behind him. "Why didn't you and George send her away?"

His anger was the greater because the danger had passed, but Jane only laughed in his face.

"You do it," she said. "Tom Norwood himself no could make her go away. She like her dad, that girl."

Rod turned to look at his sister, and as he looked he was the first to see that someone had entered the door, swung wide open in their heedless arrival. But the others could not remain unaware of that presence. Just inside the door The Spider squatted. His hands seemed to grip the floor, his great, barrel-like body was as tense as a coiled spring and his huge head was sunk between the thick shoulders.

Cron glared up at them from beneath thick, black brows. His heavy face was no longer a mask. The ruthless spirit blazed from every line and feature. Men and women alike drew back, leaving the center of the room free. Dead silence came — startling after the wild clamor.

As the others drew back, The Spider saw Bapinini in the corner. The half-breed seemed to shrink there in the chair. He was powerless to take his eyes from the dread figure and there was a convulsive trembling of his entire body as Cron swung forward.

"Where's Jim?" he demanded.

It was a roar, and yet it cracked and snapped. "The Laughing Man's" face became grotesque in his terror.

"Jim is dead, Cron," Rod said coolly.

"Dead, eh?" The Spider's eyes shifted to Rod, glaring, boring, appraising.

"And this one has talked," he growled.

It was a statement, not a question, and its startling audacity, its reckless, ruthless import, dumbfounded Rod for a moment. Then The Spider's sneer aroused him.

"And he'll talk in court!" Rod exclaimed. "He'll talk and you'll hang, Cron."

"Court!" The Spider roared. "I thought so, you gutless pup! Talk in court, will he?"

A knife came from somewhere, its handle clenched in The Spider's right hand. He swung toward the cowering half-breed. Rod leaped forward, but was hurled into a corner by a sweep of Cron's left arm.

Bapinini rose to his feet and in a final burst of sheer animal desperation, perhaps remembering his father's fate, he grasped the back of the chair, leaped forward and swung it down upon The Spider's head.

Cron threw up both arms and took the blow on the elbows. The knife was jarred from his grip but he reached up and dragged Bapinini to the floor.

It happened so quickly Rod had not yet regained his feet. Bapinini screamed as does a rabbit. He struggled like a cat, striking, tearing, kicking, claw-

ing, while The Spider's huge arms encircled and crushed him. He was flung to the floor and there his right hand found the knife.

The half-breed twisted and struck — struck again and again at The Spider's broad chest. Cron's hand shot out and wrested the knife from his frenzied grip.

Death was in The Spider's face now and yet the man would not die until he had accomplished his purpose. The indomitable will, fearful and malign, persisted. Rod was rushing forward, but with a determination that held even that young man in awe of such unwavering resolution, Cron thrust the blade into Bapinini's heart.

Nor was that the end. The Spider slowly twisted around and glared malevolently at Rod before he fell forward, dead.

26

Rod was the first to shake himself free of the spell of Aaron Cron's death. The undeviating, remorseless spirit of the man, as exemplified in that last moment, persisted in the Norwood dwelling house long after the body had been buried on an island far down the lake.

That had been Beth's suggestion. She wanted to rid the post of all thought of the man, but neither she nor the others could do this. Remorseless and cruel and brutal though his life had been, he had enveloped his passing with a terrible splendor. Like his body, his soul had become misshapen, a hideous, monstrous thing, and yet it had preserved a force that transcended ugliness and malignancy.

But once he had accepted the fact of The Spider's death, Rod's own spirit was released from the grim bonds that had held it, that had driven him to fierce, heedless accomplishment. For two days he was busy about the post. A number of things required attention and he alone was sufficiently self-possessed to look after them. The third morning he arose early, after a long sleep, and ate breakfast before the others appeared.

When he had finished he went to the trade shop, more to satisfy himself that the fall work was done than to perform any particular task. George was there, still babbling with some incoherency but still dropping bits of information that had escaped the young trader in those first feverish days.

While he talked, Rod saw Marian crossing to the lake shore in front of the trade shop. He opened the door and ran out to join her.

"Had breakfast?" he asked.

The girl started, turning to look at him with unconcealed astonishment. It was the first time they had been alone together since their return, the first time since he had found her on the island. It seemed a long while ago, that day when she had spoken the hot, scornful words which had been so satisfying then and so bitter since.

But what astonished her was Rod's cheerfulness. His voice was as she remembered first having heard it. His face was no longer drawn and haggard. His eyes were warm and untroubled.

"Yes, I have just finished breakfast," she said with a smile.

"Fine!" he cried. "What do you say to a little paddle down the lake? The bush is at its best in the fall. No flies. Wonderful air. And the shores! Look at them."

She had been looking at the shores, gorgeous in their brief panoply of orange and yellow, but she turned to look again to hide the flood of color that

had rushed to her face, to still if possible the sudden fluttering of her heart.

But Rod was not looking at her. He had gone on down the bank, was turning over a canoe and placing it in the water.

"Come on!" he called. "Hop in."

He was still cheerful, even gay, but there was a peremptory note in his voice that sent her blood to leaping and she ran down to join him.

"Here! Turn around and pick up that paddle," he said as she sat down in the bow facing him.

Again she flushed, and again her heart raced as she changed positions. Rod thrust his paddle against the bank and sent the light birch rushing out over the water. Before the impetus was lost his quick strokes were shooting it on.

"Faster!" he called as Marian began to paddle. "Ever notice the Indians? They take twice as many strokes as you're taking. Short, quick, hard! That's it. See the difference?"

The canoe was leaping now, the water swirling around the bow and hissing along the sides. Marian dashed her paddle in, tugged quickly, threw it ahead, bending and swaying to the rise and fall of the craft.

Again her heart beat wildly, but from a new stimulus. Never before had she realized the poetry of a paddle stroke, the rhythm in the sway of her body and the flashing blade, and most of all the unison of two persons in harmonious endeavor. It

was sublimated dancing. There was the motion, the perfect accord, and there was the speed, the stretch of blue water, the changing shores, the intoxicating air of a northern autumn.

Marian was entranced. She wanted to go on like this forever. She felt that she and Rod and the canoe were one — a leaping, rhythmic whole. She discovered that the craft communicated each movement of his body, the strong, decisive tugs at the paddle, the powerful heave of his shoulders.

And then the canoe swerved, his paddle strokes ceased. Her heart sank. The exquisite thrill vanished and left her cold. Rod brought the canoe broadside to a sand beach, stepped ashore and held the gunwale while she got out.

Marian was breathless, tired from the burst of speed, suddenly flat and exhausted. She dropped to the sand and sat with her back to a great boulder. Rod threw himself down a few feet distant and looked out over the lake.

"I suppose your father wants to get back," he said abruptly.

"We are planning on going as soon as you can spare someone to take us to the railroad."

"Us!" he exclaimed sharply. "You didn't think you were going?"

"Why——" she faltered.

He stared at her intently, almost fiercely. There was nothing in his gaze or manner to tell her he was drinking in her beauty and glorying in it.

"You are not going back to The States," he said with calm finality. "To-morrow we will start for Heathcote — you and Beth and your father and I. We will take Henry to help paddle and send him back from the railroad with the second canoe. The four of us will go on to Port Arthur together and from there your father will go home and Beth to college."

Perhaps it was habit — that last flare of spirit — a natural protective or defensive parry, when she asked challengingly, "And what becomes of me?"

He did not answer. He did not even look at her. His face was turned toward the lake and she was startled when he suddenly burst forth in boyish enthusiasm.

"You've never seen this country in the fall. I know how it is in The States. It's spring and summer people look forward to. They are the pleasant times. But up here it's different. Fall's the time. October! Frosty nights. Then you know what a campfire means. Maybe a snow flurry, just enough to make the clear days brighter, the lakes more blue.

"There are partridge, and lake trout. The geese are flying and you hear them while you lie in your tent at night. Why, even frying bacon smells differently in the fall. A canoe is swifter. A portage is easier. Camp is a delight."

His enthusiastic description broke off and he whirled to face her.

"Marian, you haven't seen the north yet," he said. "You've seen only a nightmare, one of its rare bursts of ugliness. Things like that happen sometimes but they can't happen again around here.

"You can't imagine what Lake Deception was in the old days, before mother died, when Beth and I were kids. Nothing could have been lovelier, more charming."

He threw himself forward until his face was close to hers.

"We're going to bring those days back," he whispered. "Love and happiness ruled here for a long time, and they're going to rule again."

Wide-eyed, breathless, Marian saw the adoration in his eyes.

"Rod!" she cried as she drew back. "Don't! Wait! I must ——"

He drew her to him, drowned her words with kisses. She struggled for a moment, then threw her arms about his neck and clung to him, sobbing and laughing. At last she lay still in his arms.

"Now do you want to stay?" he whispered.

She sprang erect like a steel spring.

"Don't! Don't! she cried. "Not until I have told you, Rod — told you how I hate myself for ——"

"Stop!" he commanded.

He was decisive, fiercely so, almost savage.

"Not a word of that! Understand? Ever. Promise it."

"But Rod!" she pleaded piteously. "I must——"

"Promise it!" Rod repeated.

There was a thrill in that harsh command she had never known before. For a moment she stood there. Something within her was making a last valiant stand, a final, convulsive struggle.

"Promise it!" he repeated, and he was savage now. "That never counted. I knew you."

"I promise," she whispered, and she found there was ineffable rapture in submission.

A little later, when Rod told Beth that she was to start for Heathcote in the morning and go back to college, she flared in protest.

"I'm not!" she cried fiercely. "It's my job to stay here with you. I won't leave you again."

"You're going," he answered firmly. "To-morrow."

Marian, who stood beside them, smiled as she looked from one to the other.

"Rod Norwood, I won't go and leave you!" Beth declared.

"You will," he answered, "because you would be in the way. Next year, if you wish, or any year after that, but this winter——"

Beth's face broke into an ecstatic smile. Her mouth opened but for a moment no cry came from it. Then with a cry of joy she flung herself upon Marian, kissed and hugged her, tore herself free and dashed into Rod's arms.

But that afternoon when she saw Rod alone her face was serious.

"You don't know how glad I am," she said. "There's just one thing. I wouldn't speak of it only — only I love you so, too. But Marian — you must be careful. She's —she's — well, what you might call strong-minded, Rod, and you must remember it, must give in sometimes."

Through the ages men have permitted women to delude them with the idea that the fairer sex is unfathomable while man himself has remained as a clear and shallow pool. At great effort, Rod Norwood suppressed a smile.

"Thanks, Beth," he said. "I'm glad you gave me the tip. I'll keep an eye open for such things."

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